



# Interpreting Selected Violin Works by György Kurtág

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## Declaration

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## Abstract

Performance of the violin works of Hungarian composer György Kurtág (1926-) requires interpretation of musical notation that is deliberately sparse and ambiguous, and due to the advanced age of the composer and his increasingly private persona, going directly to the source for guidance is no longer an option. The key to interpretation then lies with those violinists who have worked directly with Kurtág in preparing his works such as Hiromi Kikuchi, András Keller, Movses Pogossian and Graeme Jennings. This performance-oriented research project has focussed on selected key works of Kurtág - *Signs, Games and Messages* (1989-) for solo violin, *Signs, Games and Messages* (1989-) for string trio, *Tre Pezzi* (1979) for violin and piano and *Varga Bálint Ligatúrāja* (2007) for piano trio, and the resulting performances of this research are contained in the performance folio. These performances have been informed by guidance from Graeme Jennings, who has worked directly with Kurtág, and analysis of recordings by violinists who have experienced a privileged connection with Kurtág and his unnotated ideas about musical interpretation. This research contributes to the understanding of the unwritten performance practice of Kurtág's violin works and reveals Kurtág's preference for a gestural interpretation and a fragile and varied sound world that may border on the edge of audibility. The findings underscore the necessity for an experimental process when approaching Kurtág's works and the exploration of a range of technical solutions to achieve the desired interpretative effects.

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## Chapter One - Introduction and Literature Review

The music of Hungarian composer György Kurtág occupies a unique position in the canon of contemporary classical music. Unlike most composers of the last century, he is not associated with any formal school or movement and instead has incorporated disparate elements into a musical style which is neither avant-garde nor retrogressive. Although his music has remained in vogue for the last thirty years, there is a surprising lack of interpretive guidance for performers. This problem is compounded by Kurtág's notational style, which is deliberately sparse and open to interpretation. Kurtág's compositions often eschew time signatures, use relational durations (for sound and silence), and rely on the performer's interpretation of "The Signs;" a set of almost symbolic notational symbols adopted by Kurtág.

Anecdotal evidence from musicians who have collaborated closely with the composer can attest to his predilection for remarkably specific and varied performance techniques that are not represented in the score. These performers, and others close to Kurtág, also testify to a broad set of artistic principles that are crucial for a successful interpretation of his music. At 91 years of age, Kurtág has now retreated from public life so it is therefore critical to seek guidance from performers to ensure that the performance practice surrounding Kurtág's works is not lost forever.

This research will provide interpretive insight into violin works by Kurtág; selections from *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin, selections of *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio, *Tre Pezzi* for violin and piano, and *Varga Bálint Ligaturája* for piano trio.



Specialist performers Graeme Jennings (violin), Peter Tanfield (violin) and Michael Kieran Harvey (piano) have been consulted in relation to the interpretation possibilities of these works. Critical reflection on seminal recordings and interviews with performers with first-hand experience working with Kurtág have also been included. This research addresses a large gap in the literature and will contribute to the ongoing engagement of performers with the violin works of György Kurtág.

## Background

György Kurtág was born February 19, 1926 to Hungarian parents in Lugoj, Romania, a small town close to the Hungarian border. As a child, Kurtág studied piano intermittently,<sup>1</sup> and at 20 years of age moved to Budapest to study piano performance at the Franz Liszt Academy. Kurtág graduated in piano and chamber music in 1951, however, he continued studying composition with Sándor Veress (1946-48) and Ferenc Farkas from 1948 until graduating in 1955. He met his wife, Marta, during these student years and their son György Jnr. was born in 1954.<sup>2</sup>

During his time as a student, Kurtág was primarily known as a pianist, particularly for his interpretation of Bartók. His first-hand knowledge of Bartók certainly seeped into his own compositions; Kurtág admits that his Viola Concerto, one of his most substantial student works, was influenced by Bartók.<sup>3</sup>

During his student years the political situation in Hungary became increasingly intrusive - certain musical works (even by Bartók) were banned by the communist party, and Kurtág was obliged to toe the party line. These experiences affected Kurtág's unique compositional style. Within his oeuvre, there are networks of obscured personal references and musical

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Church, "Classical: Small Is Beautiful; for György Kurtág, Less Is More. Yet, Despite the Composer's Minimal Output, He Is a Colossus of Modern Music, Writes Michael Church," *The Independent*, April 19, 2002, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/gyorgy-kurtag-small-is-beautiful-9146121.html> (accessed March 12, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Beckles Willson, "Kurtág, György," *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/15695> (accessed September 16, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Bálint András Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages*, Eastman Studies in Music (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009), 5.

quotations that communicate his underlying messages. Some academics have described this style as highly symbolic or “double speak.”<sup>4</sup>

The 1956 Hungarian revolution gave Kurtág short-lived hope for a better life, and its bloody defeat by Soviet forces had deep emotional repercussions. Kurtág moved to Paris the following year, where he took composition lessons with Messiaen and Milhaud, however, he cites his appointments with art psychologist Marianne Stein and his engagement with the music of Webern as the most influential experiences of that period.<sup>5</sup> During his time in Paris Kurtág remained deeply affected by the political situation in Hungary, as he recalled in an interview;

I was living in Paris, in a crisis that made it impossible for me to compose: in 1956 the world had literally collapsed around me - not just the external world but my inner world too. Numerous moral questions had also arisen in relation to the work I was doing with Marianne Stein; my entire conduct as a human being had become highly questionable. I sank to terrible depths of despair.<sup>6</sup>

This depressive period, brought on by both political and personal situations, had dramatic consequences for Kurtág’s demeanour. Even his physical mannerisms changed;

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<sup>4</sup> Anna Dalos, “György Kurtág’s Hungarian Identity and The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza (1963–1968),” *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 54 no. 3 (September 2013): 320, <http://akademai.com/doi/abs/10.1556/SMus.54.2013.3.5>.

<sup>5</sup> "The Last Master," *The Jerusalem Report*, Dec 21, 2009, (accessed September 22, 2015), <http://rk9dr6cc2p.search.serialssolutions.com/?&genre=article&sid=ProQ:&atitle=The+Last+Master&title=The+Jerusalem+Report&issn=07926049&date=2009-12-21&volume=&issue=&spage=36&author=Anonymous> (accessed September 22, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Varga, 6.

I made angular movements, almost like playing a pantomime. I even tried to alter my handwriting to an angular, crabbed style. The next stage of that was my starting to make angular forms from matches. A whole symbolic world evolved.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, from the depths of despair, Kurtág found a new way forward through the creation of a symbolic world. Indeed, Kurtág encourages a symbolic reading of his music and criticises performers who do not interpret his works with a deeper meaning in mind.<sup>8</sup>

Kurtág returned to Hungary in 1957 and remained there for the greater part of the next thirty years; this choice greatly impacted his international accessibility but allowed him to develop within a strong Hungarian musical tradition which was, at that time, removed from the wider European scene. During this period Kurtág found work as a répétiteur at the Bartók Music School, and in 1967 was appointed Professor of Piano at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest. Two years later the Liszt Academy appointed him to Professor of Chamber Music, a position he held for almost twenty years.<sup>9</sup>

In 1973 a music teacher invited Kurtág to compose a set of simple piano pieces for children, which he named *Elo-Játékok* (Pre-Games). This task, which built upon concepts that he had explored with Marianne Stein, liberated Kurtág from his second major artistic paralysis.<sup>10</sup>

Kurtág has employed the idea of “games” in his compositions since, including approximately 400 miniatures titled *Játékok* (Games) for piano (1973-2010),<sup>11</sup> *Jelek, játékok és üzenetek* (Signs, Games and Messages) for solo violin (1989-), *Jelek, játékok és üzenetek* (Signs,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>9</sup> Willson, "Kurtág, György," *Grove Music Online*.

<sup>10</sup> Varga, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Tim Johnson, "Playing Games: Reference, Reflection and Teaching the Unknowable in Kurtág's *Játékok*" (MMus diss., Goldsmiths College London, 1999), 11.

Games and Messages) for string trio (1989-) and collections under the same name for viola, cello, double bass, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, guitar, accordion and cymbalom. It was also during this period that Kurtág wrote *Tre Pezzi* (1979), another work investigated in this research, for violin and piano.

In the 1980s Kurtág began to achieve international success with *Messages of the late R. V. Trousova*<sup>12</sup> and *Kafka Fragments*, his momentous song cycle for violin and piano.<sup>13</sup> After winning international composition competitions, Kurtág officially retired from the Franz Liszt Academy in 1986 and left Hungary in 1993 to live abroad where he took up posts with the Berlin Philharmonic, the Wiener Konzerthaus, the Royal Conservatory of The Hague, and Ensemble Intercontemporain.<sup>14</sup>

Since 2002, Kurtág and his wife have lived near Bordeaux, and have both largely retreated from public life. During this period Kurtág has written a number of works featuring violin, including *...concertante...* (2003), a double concerto for violin and viola, and a significant solo violin piece titled *Hipartita* (2004). In 2007, Kurtág wrote his only piano trio *Varga Bálint Ligatúrja* for his friend András Bálint Varga. In the same year Kurtág wrote a violin duo called *Triptic*, which has since been recalled. Kurtág continues to devote his time to composition, however has suffered from serious health difficulties.<sup>15</sup> As Kurtág has relied so heavily on guiding performers to reach an interpretation of his works, there is a sense that, with his retirement and eventual death, this critical performance practice will be lost. Marta Kurtág voices this concern, saying "...people in Hungary keep telling Gyuri [György] that his

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<sup>12</sup> "The Last Master," 36.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Szendy, "György Kurtág: Kafka-Fragmente," Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique, <http://brahms.ircam.fr/works/work/9779/> (accessed November 8, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Willson, "Kurtág, György," *Grove Music Online*.

<sup>15</sup> Varga, 97.

music will disappear because when he is gone performers will not find the key to it.”<sup>16</sup> It is therefore vital to the ongoing performance practice to consult performers who have worked with Kurtág first-hand. As Kurtág is increasingly unable to control the interpretive practice associated with his work, there is now the opportunity for performers to gather background information, instrumental techniques and philosophical concerns to create a renewed interpretive practice.

## Literature Review

There is a considerable amount of general information available on Kurtág. Academic articles and books have appeared from the late 1970s onwards, and generally fall into three categories; biographical accounts, Kurtág’s compositional genealogy, or analysis of specific works from his oeuvre. Widely referenced authors writing in Hungarian and German include István Balázs, Péter Halász, Georgy Kroó, János Kárpáti, Hartmut Lück and Friedrich Spangemacher.

András Bálint Varga, a Hungarian music publisher and writer, was granted one of the few interviews with the notoriously private Kurtág. Varga has published these interviews across three books: one featuring Kurtág, one memoir (reflecting upon his life via the interviews he has conducted),<sup>17</sup> and the other a compilation of interviews with twentieth century composers.<sup>18</sup> In *György Kurtág: Three interviews and Ligeti Homages*, interview topics range from life events, compositional practice and interpretive preferences.<sup>19</sup> While this text

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>17</sup> Bálint András Varga, *From Boulanger to Stockhausen: Interviews and a Memoir*, (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Bálint András Varga, *Three Questions for Sixty-Five Composers*, (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages*.

gives invaluable to the reclusive composer, Varga is a close friend of Kurtág's and, perhaps due to this relationship, has allowed Kurtág significant editorial power. This source can be therefore understood as an accurate representation Kurtág's ideas, yet also a highly curated account of the composer.

Rachel Beckles Willson is currently the foremost scholar on Kurtág. In addition to writing Kurtág's general biography on the *Grove Online's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, she has written extensively about his instrumental works, giving specific information on certain works and the circumstances of their creation.<sup>20</sup> Willson has also published a book and a number of articles that provide critical commentary on the Hungarian political conditions that have shaped Kurtág's artistic practice. Her book focuses on how musical-political power structures affected Kurtág and his fellow composer György Ligeti from inside and outside Hungary; it captures political events and their effects in much detail, and provides the context for understanding the musical-political references in Kurtág's music.<sup>21</sup> In an article which complements the book, Willson fleshes out this position by analysing Kurtág's early politically-based compositions that he has since withdrawn from his oeuvre.<sup>22</sup> Willson's work contextualises the political and personal dimensions of the hidden references in Kurtág's compositions.

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<sup>20</sup> Rachel Beckles Willson, "Kurtág's Instrumental Music, 1988-1998," *Tempo*, no. 207 (December 1998): 15-21, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/944504>.

<sup>21</sup> Rachel Beckles Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music During the Cold War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Rachel Beckles Willson, "'Culture Is a Vast Weapon, Its Artistic Force Is Also Strong.' Finding a Context for Kurtág's Works: An Interim Report," *Contemporary Music Review* 20, no. 2/3 (03// 2001): 3-37, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07494460100640151>.

In another article, Willson critically analyses Kurtág's personal concept of performance practice and argues that it is always situated within a specific social context.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, she argues that Kurtág's identity is connected to his position as a "Central European" artist who rebels simultaneously against the communist East and the capitalist West. Chamber music is seen as the ideal pre-industrial art-form, and should chamber music once again re-enter society-at-large, it would transform social relations. Kurtág's "Central European" identity also affects his performance practice; his pedantic rehearsal manner is underpinned by the understanding that the musical work is unreachable and that failure is therefore inevitable. Indeed, a traditional understanding of musical 'success' could mean capitulating to communist propaganda or commercial profit. This "Central European" identity affects Kurtág's use of unclear or relational notation and his commitment to wide variety of interpretive options. This article is highly relevant to my research, as it explains the reasons behind Kurtág's interpretive flexibility and dogmatic rehearsal manner, and the tension between these two approaches. This article draws from a wide range of sources, is persuasive, and is a new perspective on Kurtág; furthermore, her thoughtful analysis of Kurtág's approach to performance practice is also deeply critical, something that other scholars have avoided.

Willson has inherited a scholarly legacy from two researchers who were among the first to write (in English) about Kurtág –Stephen Walsh and Margaret McLay. Stephen Walsh's "Outline Study" (in two parts), published in 1982, was one of the earliest overviews of Kurtág's work.<sup>24</sup> The overview examines Kurtág's output from 1959-1981, and is widely

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<sup>23</sup> Rachel Beckles Willson, "A Study in Geography, 'Tradition', and Identity in Concert Practice," *Music & Letters* 85, no. 4 (November 2004): 602-613, [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/music\\_and\\_letters/v085/85.4willson01.pdf](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/music_and_letters/v085/85.4willson01.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Walsh, "György Kurtág: An Outline Study (II)," *Tempo*, no. 142 (1982 ): 10-19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/944812>.



referenced by many scholars. The purpose of Walsh's articles was to introduce Kurtág and a selection of his works to the British music community. In this sense, the articles are broad and introductory and, while containing important biographical information, do not present an argument. Indeed, these articles seem to continue on from the article Walsh published one year earlier introducing a number of Hungarian composers.<sup>25</sup>

Margaret Purcell McLay's research on Kurtág began in the mid-1980s. Her doctoral dissertation analyses Kurtág's general composition techniques, particularly pitch and rhythm, and analyses a selection of pieces, including *String Quartet No 1*, *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza* and *Ommagio a Luigi Nono*.<sup>26</sup> During this time, McLay also published a number of short journal articles that discussed certain works, such as the *Kafka Fragments*<sup>27</sup> and *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*,<sup>28</sup> adding significantly to the body of work on Kurtág. McLay contributed to the general background on Kurtág and analysed his pieces from many perspectives, however is lacking an overarching critical commentary and did not draw together major themes.

Other general sources on Kurtág include Paul Griffiths, whose book provides biographical details and general insight into his composing style. Griffiths focuses on *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*, *...quasi una fantasia...*, and *Samuel Beckett: What is the Word*, and explores the importance of Kurtág's relationship with the Hungarian soprano Adrienne Csengery.<sup>29</sup>

William Kinderman's chapter on Kurtág explores themes and the compositional process of

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<sup>25</sup> Stephen Walsh, "Messages from Budapest. Some New Works from Hungary," *The Musical Times* 122, no. 1656 (1981): 97-100, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/960858>.

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Purcell McLay, "The Music of György Kurtág, 1959-1980," PhD Diss., University of Liverpool, 1986, <http://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.379355>

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Purcell McLay, "Kurtág's 'Kafka Fragments'," *Tempo*, no. 163 (1987): 45-47, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/945699>.

<sup>28</sup> Margaret Purcell McLay, "Kurtág's 'Bornemisza' Concerto," *The Musical Times* 129, no. 1749 (1988): 580-583, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/966784>.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

*Kafka Fragments* and *Hommage á R. Sch.*<sup>30</sup> Judit Kele's short documentary provides insight into Kurtág's home life, musical ideas and inspiration.<sup>31</sup>

More recently, the literature has moved away from a general focus on Kurtág and his writing to placing his work in historical context. In particular, there is a growing body of work which is concerned with consolidating Kurtág's place in Hungarian music history.

Anna Dalos approaches this from a social-political perspective, exploring the way that restrictions on freedom of speech in Hungary have manifested in Kurtág's compositions. In particular, she identifies the concept of "double speech," where musical material plays a symbolic function, either by alluding to other composers or creating self-referential logic within the composition.<sup>32</sup> This article is well researched, though narrower in scope than those by Willson. While this article is focussed on the compositional-analytical instead of interpretive concerns, this concept of "double speech" is extremely useful from an interpretive point of view. If the performer can identify these hidden messages in Kurtág's compositions, it will provide impetus for a different interpretive direction.

Simone Homaier's article addresses Kurtág's relationship with work of Hungarian music theorist Erno Lenvai. Homaier explores how Lenvai deeply influenced Kurtág's understanding of Bartók's music, in particular, the structural purpose of intervallic relations in Bartók's first and second Violin Concertos.<sup>33</sup> While this article initially makes good use of

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<sup>30</sup> William Kinderman, *The Creative Process in Music from Mozart to Kurtág* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

<sup>31</sup> Judit Kele, *György Kurtág: The Matchstick Man* DVD, Directed by Judit Kele, Paris: Ideale Audience International, 1996.

<sup>32</sup> Dalos, "György Kurtág's Hungarian Identity and The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza (1963–1968)," 319–330.

<sup>33</sup> Simone Hohmaier, "Mutual Roots of Musical Thinking: György Kurtág, Péter Eötvös and Their Relation to Ernő Lendvai's Theories," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43, no. 3/4 (2002): 223–234, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/902585>.

primary source material, the potential relevance of these intervallic relations is encumbered by dense musical examples.

Sylvia Grmela discusses Kurtág's overt use of reference throughout his entire body of music, whether it is reference to other composers or reference to himself, by quoting and reworking previous material.<sup>34</sup> She invents a categorising system, and shows its usefulness in analysing his Op.28 string quartet *Officium Breve in Memoriam Andreae Szervánszky*. Grmela's article, while small in scope, is well argued and identifies referential or self-referential elements as crucial to Kurtág's compositions.

Freidmann Sallis also examines Kurtág's self-proclaimed lineage through an analysis of references that appear in Kurtág's *Hommage a R. Sch.* for clarinet, viola and piano.<sup>35</sup> Using sketches from the Paul Sacher Foundation in Switzerland, Sallis argues that Kurtág drew pitch, form and rhythm from Schumann and Guillaume de Machaut, and that Kurtág's style of incorporating disparate elements is reminiscent of Bartok. This article is well argued and, in particular, manages to demonstrate the indirect or abstract nature of Kurtág's musical inspiration while still providing illuminating musical examples.

Another journal article by Simone Homaier uses the same method as Sallis; she explores Kurtág's compositional process by analysis of sketches at the Paul Sacher Foundation.<sup>36</sup> In particular, Homaier uses sketches and the performance notes from *Játékok* for solo piano to argue that Kurtág's style is centred around playful or etude-like material. While this article

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<sup>34</sup> Sylvia Grmela, "Recall and Repetition in Some Works by Kurtág," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43, no. 3/4 (2002): 371-381, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/902596>.

<sup>35</sup> Friedemann Sallis, "The Genealogy of György Kurtág's 'Hommage À R. Sch', Op. 15d," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 43, 3/4 (2002): 311-322, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/902591>.

<sup>36</sup> Simone Hohmaier, "Analysis--Play--Composition: Remarks on the Creative Process of György Kurtág," *Contemporary Music Review* 20, no. 2/3: (January 2001): 39-50, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07494460100640161>

leans towards compositional analysis rather than interpretative possibilities, the discussion around playful material and performance notes is highly relevant to my research, as they both encourage the performer to interpret the works in an experimental and open-minded manner. Additionally, Homaier's use of the original hand-drawn manuscript as a point of analysis is important and creates avenues for further research.

A dissertation by Tim Johnson (now Rutherford-Johnson) argues that *Játékok* for solo piano is essential for an understanding of Kurtág's music and has been unfairly dismissed by previous scholars who believed their pedagogical origins diminished their compositional value.<sup>37</sup> Johnson argues that Kurtág uses *Játékok* as a conceptual outlet, as well as a means to forge connections and send messages to friends and colleagues. Through the analysis of three piano pieces from the collection, Johnson argues that physical gesture is the first priority in an interpretation of these works. This article is relevant to my research; not only is my repertoire selection part of the *Játékok* family, but the interpretation of which has included physical gesture as an important consideration. Johnson's article, presumably borne out of the dissertation, is more condensed but covers similar territory.<sup>38</sup> In both cases, Johnson's writing is well researched, is detailed in discussion of the works, and thoughtful in his synthesis of major concepts.

In addition to these academic sources, there are a number of interviews with violinists, violists and cellists who have worked with Kurtág. These interviews with Rolf Schulte

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<sup>37</sup> Tim Johnson, "Playing Games: Reference, Reflection and Teaching the Unknowable in Kurtág's *Játékok*" (MMus diss., Goldsmiths College London, 1999), 9.

<sup>38</sup> Tim Johnson, "Communication and Experience: Some Observations on the Relationship between Composer and Performer in *Játékok*," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43, no. 3/4 (2002), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/902589>.

(violin),<sup>39</sup> Graeme Jennings (violin),<sup>40</sup> András Keller (violin),<sup>41</sup> Brett Dean (viola),<sup>42</sup> Kim Kashkashian (viola),<sup>43</sup> and Frances Marie-Uitti (cello),<sup>44</sup> provide insight into Kurtág's interpretive practice and their experiences working with the composer. In addition, video footage of Movses Pogossian and Tony Arnold workshopping *Kafka Fragments* (for violin and soprano) with Kurtág is of interest.<sup>45</sup> While these sources are informative, these interviews do not rigorously explore the interpretive difficulties of the repertoire and instead focus on personal experiences. In this sense, they do not fill the gap of building an interpretive practice around Kurtág's music.

Other valuable sources include recordings of repertoire selected for performance in my research project. Key performers of my selected repertoire include violinists Movses Pogossian and Marta Abraham, violist Kim Kashkashian, the Vienna Piano Trio, and string trio Ensemble Epomeo. All performers discussed have been contacted to verify and comment on their connection to Kurtág and his music. Recordings from these and other performers are discussed in greater detail in the chapters that follow.

Kurtág also worked extensively with violinists András Keller and Hiromi Kikuchi on other repertoire, as well as the violinists from the Keller Quartet and the Arditti Quartet on works

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<sup>39</sup> Rolf Schulte, "An Advocate for the Piece," *Contemporary Music Review* 21, no. 1 (2002): 49-60, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07494460216643>

<sup>40</sup> Zubin Rustom Kanga, "Inside the Collaborative Process: Realising New Works for Solo Piano," PhD diss., London Royal Academy of Music, 2014, 223.

<sup>41</sup> Martin Anderson, "'Every Note is a Statement': The Keller Quartet and 'the Art of Fugue' - András Keller Talks to Martin Anderson," *Fanfare - the Magazine for Serious Record Collectors*, 22 (March 1999,) 105-109, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1255829?accountid=14245> (accessed June 27, 2015).

<sup>42</sup> Alexina Hawkins, "ANAM Fellowship - Interview with Brett Dean" (Video), Posted by Brazilnutshoe, May 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18yMGK7W49U> (accessed May 10, 2017).

<sup>43</sup> Corinne Ramey, "An Explorer's Mind," *Strings* 27, no. 8, (March 2013): 40-44, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rih&AN=A919033&site=eds-live>

<sup>44</sup> Jack de Kuiper, Jack, "Frances-Marie Uitti," *Contemporary Music Review* 25, no. 5-6 (October-December 2006): 517-523, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/07494460600990554>

<sup>45</sup> *György Kurtág: The Matchstick Man*, DVD, Directed by Judit Kele, Paris: Ideale Audience International, 1996.

for string quartet. These performers have premiered and recorded numerous works; these recordings are relevant as they demonstrate Kurtág's preference for fragile sound quality and disparate interpretive directions. However, the repertoire they have predominately recorded was not available to me due to complications such as recalled scores, solos with full orchestras and difficult instrument combinations (such as violin with cimbalom).

It is clear that there is a broad gap in the literature concerning the performance practice of Kurtág's violin music; piano is the only instrument thus far to breach the topic. While existing research has contributed relevant anecdotal information, it has not been compiled or critically analysed.

## **Aim**

The aim of this research is to develop a considered interpretation, a successful technical execution and communicative performance of the chosen works by György Kurtág: selections from *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin, selections of *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio, *Tre Pezzi* for violin and piano, and *Varga Bálint Ligatúrāja* for piano trio. This is demonstrated through a folio of performances (see below). Through this process, I have developed an informed performance practice of these selected works, and anticipate that, in the future, this knowledge can also be applied to the interpretation of other works in Kurtág's oeuvre.

The folio of performances is accompanied by an exegesis which contextualises the performances and explains how the research undertaken has informed my performances. The exegesis examines each of the selected works, drawing from a variety of sources, including

existing interviews and written material, workshops, critical listening of selected recordings, and first-hand feedback from violinists Graeme Jennings and Peter Tanfield and pianist Michael Kieran Harvey. Extra information that may be relevant to the interpretation of each work, such as Kurtág's biographical details and extra-musical influences, have also been examined.

## **Methodology**

Initial engagement with selected repertoire began with score-study, background research and critical listening to selected recordings. Following this, violin practice identified interpretive and technical problems. An interpretation-in-progress was then presented to the specialist performers, whose feedback was incorporated before performance and/or recording. Finally, self-evaluation on the performance or recording was used to judge interpretive outcomes and provide future direction for research. My folio incorporates material from three recitals and one recording project. The repertoire for each recital is discussed below.

**Recital 1:** 7 selected works from *Signs, Games and Messages* (1989-) for solo violin, J. S. Bach Partita no 3 in E major.

*Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin is the only solo violin work currently available from Kurtág. While he has written a substantial solo violin work titled *Hipartita* (2004) the performing rights are reserved for violinist Hiromi Kikuchi, and the score cannot be published until the dissolving of this restriction. *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin, however, was an ideal starting point to develop my interpretive practice. Kurtág has added and revised movements from this collection over the last twenty years, thus giving a good

overview of his compositional style. Each movement from J. S. Bach's Partita no 3 in E major was paired with a movement sharing similarities in character or rhythmic energy from *Signs, Games and Messages*. This pairing reflects Kurtág's deep interest in teaching, performing and drawing inspiration from the music of Bach.<sup>46</sup> In my programme order, I alternated between Bach and Kurtág as this most effectively highlighted similarities and contrasted differences. This programme was re-recorded during the same period as my recording project.

**Recital 2:** *Tre Pezzi* (1979) for violin and piano, *Varga Bálint Ligatúrja* (2007) for piano trio, selections from *44 Duos for two violins* by Belá Bartók, *Sonata No. 2 ("Obsession")* by Eugène Ysaÿe, *Anthèmes I*, by Pierre Boulez.

In this recital programme is Kurtág's only violin and piano duo and his only piano trio. As they are composed almost 20 years apart, they provide a sense of his compositional aesthetic and development. The remainder of the programme is filled by Bartók, Ysaÿe and Boulez providing a French and Hungarian theme. Boulez is an interesting contrast to Kurtág; during the 1970s-80s Boulez enjoyed institutional favour (particularly at the Darmstadt Summer Course) while Kurtág was deemed out of vogue, however they reached equal fame and influence by turn of the next century.

**Recital 3:** *Violin Concerto in D major*, Jean Sibelius

It was valuable to hone technique and performance stamina in preparation and performance of this concerto. Unfortunately, the length and demand of this concerto meant that I did not

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<sup>46</sup> Varga, György Kurtág: *Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages*, 9-10.



perform any works by Kurtág in this recital. The remaining repertoire has been incorporated into a recording project.

**Recording Project:** *Signs, Games and Messages* (1989-) for string trio, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart *Violin Concerto No 5* in A major K219, “Allegro aperto” (with cadenza).

This recording project features a selection from *Signs, Games and Messages* (1989-) for string trio. These works, like *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin, are open to new additions and revisions, and have some crossover in material and concepts.

**Final recital:** Selected works from *Signs, Games and Messages* (1989-) for solo violin, selected works from *Signs, Games and Messages* (1989-) for string trio, *Tre Pezzi* (1979) for violin and piano, Brahms Violin Sonata No. 1 in G major, Op. 78.

The final recital gives an overview of my research on Kurtág and is paired with the Brahms Violin Sonata in G major.

## Chapter Two - *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin

This chapter discusses the interpretation and performance of selected works from *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin by György Kurtág, with a particular focus on “Doloroso Garzulyéknak,” “Hommage á J.S.B,” and “In memoriam Blum Tamás.” These movements, which are part of *Játékok* (the larger collection to which *Signs, Games and Messages* belongs), feature a network of hidden personal references and use his ambiguous idiomatic notational system “The Signs.” An understanding of “The Signs” has been developed through the critical analysis of selected recordings and discussion with violinist Graeme Jennings, who has worked with Kurtág, about the interpretation and performance of these movements. The interpretation of *Signs, Games and Messages* is difficult because of the intentional ambiguity Kurtág cultivates in his directions, both on his musical scores and in the personal instruction he provides to performers. Understanding the role of this ambiguity, however, is key to understanding his musical philosophy and developing an approach to interpreting his works.

*Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin is a collection of 29 short pieces written from 1989 onwards; Kurtág has left the collection unfinished to allow for new additions or revisions, with the latest publication occurring in 2004. *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin can be loosely grouped into the playful, conceptually driven compositions that began with *Játékok (Games)* for solo piano, the composition which released Kurtág from his second major artistic paralysis. Kurtág treats these works as highly flexible; demonstrating this flexibility when working with Kim Kashkashian on *Jelek* (Signs) for solo viola, saying: “Generally, I change all that is not best for the interpreter. My pieces have no really definitive

form. If I see that it's not compatible to her, then I change it.”<sup>47</sup> In part due to this flexibility, Kurtág does not seek a fixed interpretation day-to-day, or performer-to-performer, as described by Jennings later in the chapter. Perhaps due to this flexibility and their origins as children’s pedagogical pieces, critics have doubted the significance of *Játékok* (and all works under this umbrella) in relation to Kurtág’s oeuvre; Margaret McLay claimed that Kurtág regarded them as “compositionally unimportant”<sup>48</sup> and Walsh suggested that Kurtág has a utilitarian attitude towards these miniatures as a means to develop more substantial works.<sup>49</sup> However, the sheer scale of these compositions (numbering over 400) and Kurtág’s reported attachment to the collection, indicate otherwise.<sup>50</sup> Some critics, such as György Kroó, and more recently Tim Rutherford-Johnson, have recognized their importance, saying;

These miniatures are not, I believe, simply a piano tutor, a bland collection of piano studies fulfilling a friendly request. Nor are they the frustrated doodling’s of a composer trying desperately to achieve his creative ambitions. They are a torrential outpouring of ideas - so many that there is barely time to write one down before a new one arrives - composed within an intricate, purposeful and meaningful dynamic.<sup>51</sup>

Like *Játékok*, *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin alludes to a pedagogical tradition. Some movements are confined to one or two particular violin techniques, such as *Perpetuum Mobile*, which focused on fast left-hand action and rapid string crossings, and *Panaszos nóta* (*vibrato elötanulmány*), which focuses on vibrato. However, two thirds of the collection are idea-driven character pieces dedicated to important people and places in Kurtág’s life; J.S. Bach, Ágnes Vadas, John Cage, the Garzulys, Anna Keller, Lázló Mensáros, Thomas Blum,

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<sup>47</sup> Ramey, "An Explorer's Mind," 42.

<sup>48</sup> McLay, "The Music of György Kurtág, 1959-1980," 400.

<sup>49</sup> Stephen Walsh, "György Kurtág: An Outline Study (I)," *Tempo*, no. 140 (1982): 16, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/944833>.

<sup>50</sup> Walsh, "György Kurtág: An Outline Study (II)," 13.

<sup>51</sup> Johnson, "Playing Games: Reference, Reflection and Teaching the Unknowable in Kurtág's *Játékok*," 11.

Stefan Romascanu, and the Damjanich Memorial. This collection has symbolic value in its representation of personal relationships. The fact that these movements are highly flexible and in continual revision perhaps reflects the changing dynamics of Kurtág's relationships.

*Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin is easily the most popular work by Kurtág in my selected repertoire. As a collection of short movements, it is possible for violinists to perform a few or many movements in any order desired, allowing for creative pairing with other solo or chamber works within a recital programme. *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo viola are of interest to violinists as some movements are directly transposed, thus increasing the number of available recordings for interpretive analysis.

Recordings of relevance include *In Nominae*<sup>52</sup> by Armenian-American violinist Movses Pogossian, who worked with Kurtág on several works before recording. Armenian-American violist Kim Kashkashian also worked in depth with Kurtág before recording her album *Kurtág/Ligeti*.<sup>53</sup> Other recordings of *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin include American violinist Jennifer Koh<sup>54</sup> and German violinist and violist Elisabeth Kufferath,<sup>55</sup> both of whom have recorded without input from the composer. Violinist Joel Bardolet received second hand information about Kurtág through colleagues and teachers, and it is unknown whether English violinist Tamsin Waley-Cohen<sup>56</sup> and Italian violist Maurizio Barbetti<sup>57</sup> have received input. It is worth noting that German violist Tabea Zimmermann has

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<sup>52</sup> *In Nominae*, Movses Pogossian, Albany, TROY1301, 2010, CD.

<sup>53</sup> *Kurtág/Ligeti – Music for viola*, Kim Kashkashian, ECM, CD 2240, 2012, CD.

This album was met with critical acclaim and won a Grammy Award in 2013 for Best Classical Instrumental Solo. Andrew Barker, "Winners Hit All the Right Notes," *Daily Variety* 318, no. 25 (February 11, 2013): 25, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f6h&AN=85825857&site=eds-live> (accessed October 12, 2015).

<sup>54</sup> *Signs, Games + Messages*, Jennifer Koh, Chicago, CDR 90000 143, 2013, CD.

<sup>55</sup> *Libero, fragile*, Elisabeth Kufferath, Genuin, GEN17456, 2017, CD.

<sup>56</sup> *SOLI*, Tamsin Waley-Cohen, Signum Classics, SIGCD416, 2015, CD.

<sup>57</sup> *György Kurtág: Signs, Games and Messages*, Maurizio Barbetti, Mode Records, MO230, 2010, CD.

not recorded *Signs, Games and Messages* despite receiving a dedication of one movement and working extensively with the composer. As recordings of these works typically favor a selection of movements rather than the whole collection, not all artists mentioned above will have recorded the specific movements discussed below. When critically engaging with this material, it is important to keep in mind that Kurtág, above any singular correct interpretation, demands that performers struggle with the interpretive process to develop an individualized and changing understanding of the piece. While it is worth noting which interpretations were reached in direct contact with Kurtág, it can be equally enlightening to study those interpretations which were reached more independently as these often expose divergent approaches to the ambiguities inherent to Kurtág's music. While Jennifer Koh or Elisabeth Kufferath may not have worked with the composer, their original interpretations enrich the performance practice surrounding this work.

One ensemble with a close working relationship with Kurtág, however, is The Arditti Quartet, who have worked directly with him for many years, including long rehearsal periods which former member Graeme Jennings described as the “whole intensive Kurtág experience.” Kurtág dedicated his fifth string quartet *Aus der Ferne V, Alfred Schlee in Memoriam [Voice in the Distance V, To the Memory of Alfred Schlee]* to the Arditti Quartet, which they premiered in June 1999. Irvine Arditti, first violinist and founder of the Arditti Quartet, says of his experiences working with Kurtág:

He is an incredible teacher but wishes to dominate any interpretation of his music. Maybe he just sees the errors in interpreters and ‘needs’ to correct them. We spent many hours with him rehearsing and recording his quartets. One needs a tremendous amount of patience to work with him and you must give up all pride as he can be very destructive. He came to me after a concert in England many years ago after we had

performed his Op.1 for the third or fourth time and said, you know I heard a really good performance of this piece some time ago. I said, oh and who gave that. He said YOU. He is a very sweet man and an incredible musician and the quartet and myself have a lot of time for him and his interpretation moulding. He is really a very special composer because of this.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the ensemble's vast experience with his music, Kurtág continued to coach the quartet at festivals and experiment with new interpretations of existing works. The Arditti Quartet performed the first three string quartets quite regularly, as well the "various forms" of the fourth quartet *Six Moments Musicaux*, Op. 44, which came out in instalments between 1999-2005. During this period, the Arditti Quartet also performed an experimental piece with Kurtág and his son, György Kurtág junior.<sup>59</sup>

Graeme Jennings worked with Kurtág between 1994 and 2005 during his appointment as second violinist of the Arditti Quartet. During this time, he recorded over 70 CDs of contemporary music and premiered more than three hundred new works. Jennings is now Senior Lecturer in violin and viola at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music, and plays with ELISION, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, and has been Guest Concertmaster of the Adelaide and Melbourne Symphony Orchestras.<sup>60</sup>

Like many other performers, Jennings noted Kurtág's pedantic rehearsal methods when rehearsing with the Arditti Quartet. He recalled one incident where Kurtág coached their cellist, Rohan de Saram, on a C major scale for over an hour. Jennings said of Kurtág's

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<sup>58</sup> Irvine Arditti, e-mail message to Coombe, March 5, 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Graeme Jennings, interview with Coombe, Brisbane, Queensland, November 1, 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Griffith University, "Graeme Jennings – senior lecturer in violin and viola" Griffith University, <https://www.griffith.edu.au/music/queensland-conservatorium/staff/graeme-jennings>.

musical drive, “he’s a great composer and he’s a great musician, he really cares about the interior quality of every note, he doesn’t just want you to play it well, he wants you to play it incredibly.”<sup>61</sup> Jennings suggests that the “interior quality” of a note is a combination of its character and its sound quality, both of which are intrinsically linked and tremendously important in creating a distinct symbolic identity for each piece as it is built meticulously note by note. While Jennings acknowledged the value of such detailed rehearsal and artistic resoluteness, he also noted the personal strain this could cause. He recalled a specific time when Kurtág’s wife, Márta, felt compelled to intervene after a long week of rehearsals, saying “George, George, these are not students, you cannot treat them like that, these are professionals.”<sup>62</sup>

Jennings corroborated reports from other performers that Kurtág does not seek a fixed interpretation for any prolonged period. Interpretational decisions that were rehearsed in great detail one day would be altered dramatically during the next rehearsal. Jennings remarked, “He likes things to stay fresh, which may seem contradictory, he certainly wasn’t fixed in his interpretation, and you listen to recordings he’s worked on and they’re totally different.”<sup>63</sup> This drive to shape interpretation can be viewed in a number of ways; on one level, it appears that Kurtág wishes to stamp his authority on performances, and, in some ways, deter performers who are not ‘up to scratch.’ Rolf Schule, a violinist who worked with Kurtág on *Kafka Fragments*, says of his experiences;

I would say that in my life, and altogether, violinistically, there are three pieces which I would consider the hardest things I’ve come across. This piece [*Kafka Fragments*] is one of them. I believe that the voice part is equally difficult. In fact, Kurtág says he

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<sup>61</sup> Jennings, interview, November 1, 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Jennings, interview, November 1, 2015.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

writes difficult music so that only a select few can play it!... He wants his music to sound very free, and he knows exactly what he wants. You'd play, and he would be relentless. He's infamous for his "torture sessions," so to speak.<sup>64</sup>

Another way of interpreting Kurtág's desire for interpretive input can be seen through his role as a teacher. For Kurtág, the process of teaching is deeply linked to the process of interpretation: "I understand music only when I teach... Even if I listen to it or play it myself, it's not the same as working on it and trying to understand it for others. I just love music."<sup>65</sup> Through teaching, Kurtág deepens his own interpretive insights and connection to musical works.

Kurtág's attitude of interpretational flexibility empowers performers to oppose the current performance practice. For this reason, while seminal recordings can inform interpretive possibilities, it would be antithetical to Kurtág's musical practice to consider them 'definitive'. These recordings are 'definitive' in regard to the rigorous process which was undertaken to reach interpretive decisions, not in regard to the decisions themselves.

Indeed, in Jennings' opinion, much of Kurtág's notational ambiguity is designed to encourage the performer to make a wide variety of fundamental interpretive decisions. Kurtág's notational style defies the current trend in contemporary classical music, as Jennings says;

His notation is so ambiguous a lot of the time [...], it's a suggestion to do stuff, and I think it's deliberately ambiguous too. He doesn't want to make it really specific, because that implies that you just do what's on the page. And so much contemporary

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<sup>64</sup> Schulte, "An Advocate for the Piece," p.54.

<sup>65</sup> Rachel Beckles Willson, "The Mind is a Free Creature," *Central Europe Review* 2, no. 12 (March 27, 2000), <http://www.ce-review.org/00/12/willson12.html>.



music is like that too, whereas his is not. And if you haven't worked with him, you get this stuff, these floating things with no note heads or note values, is it fast, is it slow?

Kurtág's notational ambiguity has been moderated by his accessibility as a teacher and chamber music coach. Jennings noted that this is a short-term solution, saying, "...and that's what's a bit nuts, when he's no longer around to coach people like that anymore, what kind of legacy will there be?"<sup>66</sup> Until recently, Kurtág alone has dominated the interpretive practice of his works. As his advancing age means he is increasingly unable to control this arena, there is now the opportunity for performers to gather background information, instrumental techniques and philosophical concerns and create a new culture for the interpretation of his works.

### **"Doloroso Garzulyéknak" (1992)**

"Doloroso Garzulyéknak" (Sad song for the Garzulys) was written in honor of the physician and music patron Ferenc Garzuly and his wife, the acclaimed ceramist Maria Geszler-Garzuly.<sup>67</sup> This movement introduces interpretive challenges regarding tone quality and fermata duration. The movement is a series of plaintive, mournful fragments, which are separated by fermatas of different duration. These fragments start in the middle register, are gradually embellished to stretch to the full register of the violin and then condensed as the piece comes to a close. Throughout the piece, there is a distinct juxtaposition of two characters – one marked *espressivo* (expressively) and *dolce* (sweetly) while the other is

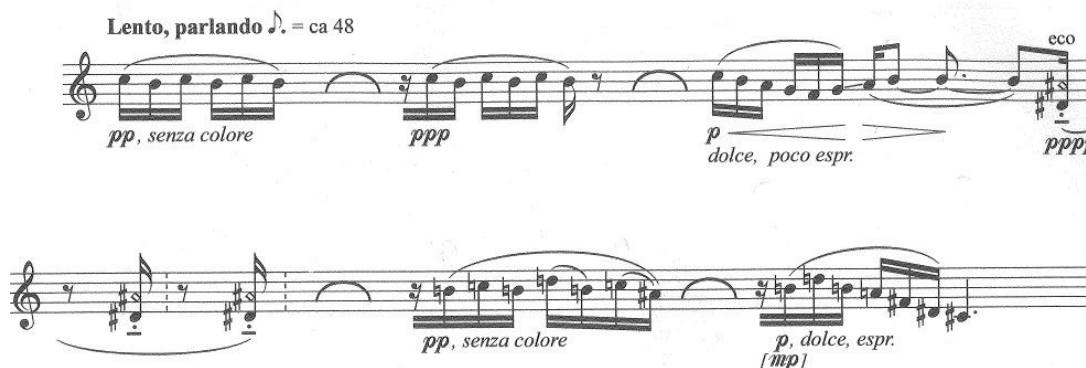
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<sup>66</sup> Jennings, interview, November 1, 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Richard E. Rodda, *Christian Tetzlaff, Solo violin*, Program notes, Princeton University Concerts, January 23, 2013, [http://www.princetonuniversityconcerts.org/docs/Tetzlaff\\_Program.pdf](http://www.princetonuniversityconcerts.org/docs/Tetzlaff_Program.pdf) (accessed May 12, 2017).

marked *senza colore* (without colour) or *eco* (echo). These characters can be seen in Figure A:

Figure A: “Doloroso Garzulyéknak” from *Signs, Games and Messages*, system 1-2.<sup>68</sup>



In addition to noting the dynamic difference between the two characters, Jennings suggested using tone quality to exaggerate their difference; the first with hollow tone, little or no vibrato and played on the A string, and the second with a sweeter tone, a “saccharine” vibrato and played on the D string for a richer colour.<sup>69</sup>

On a close listening, it is clear that Movses Pogossian and Elisabeth Kufferath use vibrato strategically, applying vibrato particularly on passages marked *dolce*, and employing no vibrato on passages marked *eco* or *senza colore*. Their respective vibratos differed, however, when it came to width, with Pogossian generally employing a wider vibrato. Maurizio Barbetti, on the other hand, used minimal or little vibrato, giving the movement a bleak, sparse character. Joel Bardolet’s recording had a markedly different sound quality in comparison to the others; a close microphone meant that additional sounds, such as breathing and the ‘white noise’ of the bow, were audible. The use of the close microphone enhances fragile tone quality, and may be a preferable method of recording such works.<sup>70</sup> Bardolet’s

<sup>68</sup> From Figures A-I score examples are from György Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin, (Budapest, Editio Musica Budapest, 2005).

<sup>69</sup> Jennings, interview, November 1, 2015.

<sup>70</sup> This topic is beyond the scope of my research, however, would be a valuable area for investigation.

use of vibrato was connected to note length rather than character, with notes longer than a crotchet receiving vibrato. This differing use of vibrato markedly shaped the character rendered by each performer; however, Barbetti's use of *senza* vibrato does not maximize the contrast available. To maximize the contrast of characters, no or little vibrato was used in passages marked *senza colore* or *eco* passages, and for passages marked *espressivo* or *dolce* a small, fast and sweet vibrato was used.

Another interpretational difficulty in "Doloroso Garzulyéknak" lay in the right-hand articulation of the echoed phrases (marked *eco* in Figure A). This phrase could be interpreted in a number of different ways; for example, the violinist might choose to show the rests by halting bow movement, retaking the bow, or alternating bow direction for each note.

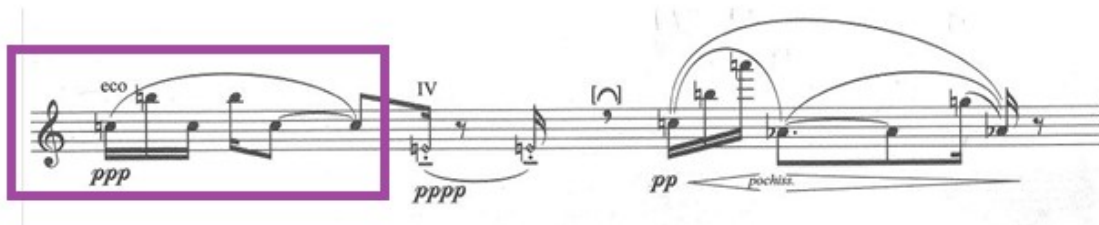
Jennings argued that these three notes constituted the same physical and visual gesture; "From [my work on] other pieces [of Kurtág's], it's so gestural. One arc of the bow that occasionally articulates this echoey note... I think that would be visually effective."<sup>71</sup> The importance of the corporeal experience is reiterated by Rutherford-Johnson, who said; "precedence is to be given to the physical gesture and manner of performance over the audible result. The players should feel the arcs described by the notation almost before sounding the pitches correctly."<sup>72</sup> While recordings from Pogossian, Kufferath, Barbetti and Bardolet are without video, the aural content indicates that all recordings aside from Barbetti's treat this *eco* phrase as one gesture with soft articulation. In accordance with Jennings' suggestion, the *eco* phrase has been played under one bow with continual arm movement, to highlight visual, gestural and breath-like qualities.

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<sup>71</sup> Jennings, interview, November 1, 2015.

<sup>72</sup> Johnson, "Communication and Experience," 287.

Jennings noted that while the echoed phrase is initially only played with harmonics, it develops into regular stopped notes (as seen below in Figure B). To ensure timbral continuation from the harmonic *eco* phrases, Jennings suggested employing *molto flautando* (flutelike, a tone produced by bowing gently but fast over the fingerboard) for such passages. Figure B: “Doloroso Garzulyéknak” from *Signs, Games and Messages*, system 3.



Another interpretive problem in “Doloroso Garzulyéknak” relates to the duration of notes and fermatas. In this piece, Kurtág uses a non-traditional form of notation to represent note length and fermata length, which is shown in Figure C.

Figure C: *The Signs Used* from *Signs, Games and Messages*

### Jelmagyarázat / Zeichenerklärung / The Signs Used

1. A „relatív”, nem hagyományos notáció hangértékei / Tonwerte in der „relativen” nicht-traditionellen Notation / Sound values in “relative”, non-traditional notation:

- rövid / kurz / short
- ◐ hosszú / lang / long
- ◑ nagyon hosszú / sehr lang / very long

2. Időtartamot módosító jelek (hangok vagy szünetek felett) / Zeichen für die Veränderung der Zeitdauer (über den Noten oder Pausen) / Signs affecting duration (over notes or rests):

- ◌ rövidítés / gekürzt / shortened
- ◌ hosszabb nyújtás / stark verlängert / longer or even long prolongation
- ◌ nagyon hosszú nyújtás / sehr stark verlängert / very long prolongation

NB. Ezek a jelek a hagyományosan lejegyzett ritmusértékekkel is előfordulhatnak, illetve önmagukban is állhatnak, szünetjelként / Diese Zeichen können auch bei der traditionellen Notation vorkommen, bzw. können als unabhängige Pausezeichen gelten / These signs can also be used in combination with traditional notation, or may serve as rest-signs by themselves:

- ◌ rövid szünet / kurze Pause / short rest
- ◌ hosszabb szünet / längere Pause / long rest
- ◌ nagyon hosszú szünet / sehr lange Pause / very long rest

5. A frazeálási egységek vége / Ende der Frasierungseinheiten / Ends of phrasing units:

- ’ cezúra / Zäsur / caesura sign
- ’ a legrövidebb, előke hosszúságú cezúra / die kürzeste Zäsur, von Wert eines Vorschlags / the shortest caesura, the length of an appoggiatura

This hierarchical system appears to be simple, yet “The Signs” present a number of problems for the performer. For example, the two highlighted symbols in Figure D and Figure E are the same signs, yet the first one is larger and elongated than the second. It is unclear whether the interpreter should treat them like a graphic score, or to interpret the change of size as an editorial convenience.

Figure D: “Doloroso Garzulyéknak” from *Signs, Games and Messages*, system 1.



Figure E: “Doloroso Garzulyéknak” from *Signs, Games and Messages*, system 6.



While there is no specific advice from any performers, an analysis of recordings have shown different interpretations of this notation. The durations of the fermatas on Figure D and E, reveal that Movses Pogossian, Kim Kashkashian and Joel Bardolet treat the two pauses as the same length. These performers were consistent with the duration of these fermatas throughout the entire piece. Elisabeth Kufferath employed different lengths of fermatas throughout Figure D, but treated the fermata in Figure E as shorter than any of the same type previously. Maurizio Barbetti treated the pauses in Figure D as the same length, and the pause in Figure E as shorter.

This variance in the performance practice may have been Kurtág’s desired outcome, as he seeks to engender a wide variation of interpretive possibilities. Indeed, this enigmatic quality may be the very purpose of “The Signs.” Kurtág has said that a “caesura means that you take measure of the next unit. If necessary, you stop.”<sup>73</sup> Kurtág’s wife and musical partner, Márta Kurtág, rephrased this statement in terms of interpretive performance practice, saying that her husband often says that “it is the performer's responsibility to highlight identities and keep

<sup>73</sup> Varga, György Kurtág: *Three interviews and Ligeti Homages*, 45.

cadences clean.”<sup>74</sup> While the inconclusiveness of these statements emphasises the flexibility of the signs, this specific problem of size variation within the same sign points to editorial convenience; Jennings suggested that this was the case.<sup>75</sup> Access to hand-written scores may provide clarification in this instance, however access is limited; selected scores are only available to view in person at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, Switzerland.

Without further clarification, the two fermatas at Figure D and E will be interpreted as the same length. This interpretation acknowledges the speech-like structure provided by the fermatas. Jennings also noted these elements;

Yeah, this says “parlando...” if you imagine that you’re a theatre actor and you’re up on stage performing Chekhov or something more obtuse, maybe you’re just muttering or whispering these little things to yourself, and yet you’re doing it in front of an audience so it is theatre. You are projecting these barely audible things in the way you deliver them and every syllable is hard to get out... imagine you’re a stutterer...<sup>76</sup>

As Jennings illuminated, Kurtág has a deep interest in music that highlights the ritual of performance. Indeed, Kurtág’s piece for soprano and upright piano titled *Samuel Beckett: What is the word?* recreates the true story of actress/singer Ildiko Monyok and her torturous journey to reacquire the ability to speak after a car accident.<sup>77</sup> This work subverts the traditional expectations of a vocal performance; ‘beautiful’ tone and ‘effortless’ sound production is replaced by guttural sounds and visible frustration and despair. “Dumb Show” from *Játékok* Volume 1 for solo piano also illustrates this penchant for the ritual of

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>75</sup> Jennings, interview, November 1, 2015.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> András Wilhelm, “György Kurtág: Samuel Beckett: What is the Word,” Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique, <http://brahms.ircam.fr/works/work/9799/> (accessed August 3, 2017).

performance. The short movement has a substantial range of rhythm, dynamics and articulation, however the composer's footnote asks the performer that they "touch the surfaces of the keys lightly, without moving any of them."<sup>78</sup> The whole movement is therefore played without sounding the piano, yet the traditional interpretive and performative roles are essential for the performance. These two works by Kurtág highlight his use of the performance ritual, and potentially the influence of John Cage.<sup>79</sup>

In the case of "Doloroso Garzulyéknak" Jennings regards silence as an event that occurs in-between sound production. These silent events, which include raising the bow to the string or the final fermata, are viewed by Kurtág as an equally important part of the performance ritual as sounding events. Jennings says of these moments;

For any of those pauses, don't retake or get ready or any of your normal preparation... just stay where you finish... so I might cue myself that semi-quaver (that's marked) and play again but that way you've held the tension in the last sound you've made which was virtually inaudible. So everyone's waiting, wondering what you're doing next... you have to be a mystical looking player... you're barely doing anything and there's barely any sound... it's a sort of theatre of the absurd in a way, but I think it actually affects the sound that comes out and it means you really care at the end of the phrase and don't do any faffing about in any of the silences...<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Johnson, "Communication and Experience," 285.

<sup>79</sup> Kurtág met John Cage at the International Bartok Seminar and Festival in Szombathely, Hungary, 1986. While Kurtág does not cite Cage as a major influence compared with Bartok or Bach, he reports that "looking at the smiling photograph of John Cage ended a period of depression," and dedicated a movement from *Signs, Games and Messages* for violin and viola to Cage.

Varga, György Kurtág: *Three interviews and Ligeti Homages*, xi.

<sup>80</sup> Jennings, interview, November 1, 2015.



Jennings argued that these preparatory movements have a direct influence on sound production, particularly for cultivating a fragile and hushed sound world. Furthermore, unnecessary physical preparation may break the illusion or ‘ritual’ of performance. My interpretation of “Doloroso Garzulyéknak” highlights gestural and ‘ritualistic’ elements through the physical stillness during fermatas and using one, rearticulated bow for *eco* passages.

### **“Hommage á J. S. B.” (not dated)**

The second selected movement, “Hommage á J. S. B.” is an acknowledgement to Kurtág’s musical hero, Johann Sebastian Bach. This piece was originally written for flute, piano and double bass in *Bagatelles*, op. 14d (1981, rev. 1999) and then as the violin solo, string trio, and a piano duo in various *Játékok* collections.<sup>81</sup> “Hommage á J. S. B.” presented interpretive challenges as Kurtág gives the violinist very few musical directions.

While there is little written about this specific movement, Kurtág’s deep admiration for Bach’s music is well known. In an interview with Varga in 1985, Kurtág said that “my fundamental reflection here is how, at any given moment, I experience Bach.”<sup>82</sup> Marta and György Kurtág are renowned for their Bach four-hand piano performances (which György transcribes himself) as well as coaching many students on Bach during György’s tenure at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music.<sup>83</sup> A recipient of such tuition is Hungarian violinist András Keller, who has worked extensively with Kurtág on a string quartet programme of Bach and

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<sup>81</sup> “György Kurtág: Bagatelles,” Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique, <http://brahms.ircam.fr/works/work/9751/> (accessed August 3, 2017).

<sup>82</sup> Varga, *György Kurtág: Three interviews and Ligeti Homages*, 9-10.

<sup>83</sup> Arnold Whitthall, “Kurtág Játékok; Bach Transcriptions,” *Gramophone*, 1997, <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/kurtag-jatekok-bach-transcriptions> accessed July 15, 2017).

Kurtág. Keller has speculated that both composers have the “same occupation with the weight of individual notes, and thus the valorisation of the silence around them.”<sup>84</sup> While this concept is not easily applied, it is an important idea that every note could be given equal importance while maintaining different musical functions in the overall structure of the piece. A brief analysis of “Hommage á J. S. B.” revealed an ABACD form, and the use of two whole-tone scales (which uses all chromatic notes) set in counterpoint. Figure F shows the two whole tone scales, the first represented in purple and the second represented in orange.

Figure F: “Hommage á J. S. B.” from *Signs, Games and Messages*, system 1-2.



Towards the end of this movement a crescendo leads to the bar where the two whole-tone scales are abruptly combined into a descending chromatic scale (see Figure G).

Figure G: “Hommage á J. S. B.” from *Signs, Games and Messages*, system 6.



This crescendo leads to a subverted peak of the movement, which is emphasized by a sudden

<sup>84</sup> Anderson, "Every Note is a Statement," 106.

hushed dynamic. The remaining five bars of the piece close in an introverted, hesitant manner rather than returning to the stately opening material. This analysis reveals a deeper structure throughout the piece gives impetus to highlight certain notes in relation to their structural function.

Recordings of this movement reveal considerable variation in tempo; Joel Bardolet plays “Hommage á J. S. B.” at the fastest tempo at quaver = 90, with Movses Pogossian at quaver = 80. The other two recordings of this movement sit much slower, with Elisabeth Kufferath and Tamsin Waley-Cohen both at quaver = 55. Additionally, Kurtág’s string trio version of this piece is performed by András Keller and The Orlando Trio, both of whom have worked with Kurtág extensively. They both recorded this movement at approximately quaver = 90.

Experimentation with these tempo variations can lead to radically different overall interpretations of the work; the slower tempos are more *legato* and sonorous, and as a result the semi-quaver pulse is slightly obscured. The faster tempos, however, are lighter and airier in tone and emphasize the rhythmic figures with a Baroque-style lilt. Jennings echoed these concerns, saying: “How much do you show those shapes? Do you make it less calm or keep flowing?”<sup>85</sup>

Jennings argued while there are a wide range of interpretive options to show these note groupings he would recommend a flowing direction *within* each group of slurs. This approach allows the movement to retain some flow and direction without committing to a rigid tempo, and gives it “an exploring quality, reaching this way and that way, like walking around in the dark.”<sup>86</sup> With this in mind, as well as the tempos chosen by András Keller and The Orlando

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<sup>85</sup> Jennings, interview, November 1, 2015.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Trio in the string trio version of “Hommage á J. S. B.,” this movement was performed at a faster tempo (quaver = 90).

The importance of intervallic relations in “Hommage á J. S. B.” was also touched on by Jennings. Major sevenths can be played with a denser tone and smooth string crossing, which, for a brief moment, will create a double-stop and further emphasize their dissonance. The abundance of the major sevenths contrasts the rare occurrence of a fifth, which hold symbolic meaning for Kurtág. He says that fifths are a “preferred interval: it is a symbol of purity if it occurs in a context where it appears as a novelty...”<sup>87</sup> In Figure H, for example, the notes in purple are, to the ear, ascending major sevenths while the notes in orange are ascending fifths.

Figure H: “Hommage á J. S. B.” from *Signs, Games and Messages*, system 2.



In this example, the fifths are surrounded by major sevenths and major seconds, indeed making them a “novelty.” In accordance with Kurtág’s symbolism, I have lessened the bow density for fifths for a ‘pure sound,’ and created density and highlighted dissonance (through miniscule double-stops) for the major sevenths.

<sup>87</sup> Varga, György Kurtág: *Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages*, 68.

### “In memoriam Blum Tamás” (1995)

“In memoriam Blum Tamás” is dedicated to Tamás Blum, a Hungarian conductor. The subtitle for this piece, which translates to “Tamás Blum is already waiting on the other side...” emphasizes its mournful character.<sup>88</sup> There is little known about their relationship except that Blum conducted the premiere of Kurtág’s Viola Concerto in 1954.<sup>89</sup>

This movement begins with a simple melody created through pulsing double-stops. As the piece builds in intensity, the opening pulse continues while the intervals become more dissonant until reaching the most dissonant interval – a unison one quarter-tone apart. Kurtág’s performance instructions for these unisons are as follows; “unisons should be markedly discordant, the lower string played nearly a quarter-tone lower. The sound quality should become increasingly sharp and uncomfortable, even scraping towards the end of the *cresc.*”<sup>90</sup> After the unisons break apart and move into the lower register, a new section begins, which introduces very simple and slow material into a quiet ending.

An important interpretive concern in this movement is the articulation possibilities for the double stops. The opening phrase (Figure I), is marked *Calmo, sereno, dolce, semplice, tenuto, pulsato* (calm, peaceful, sweet, simple, held, pulsating).

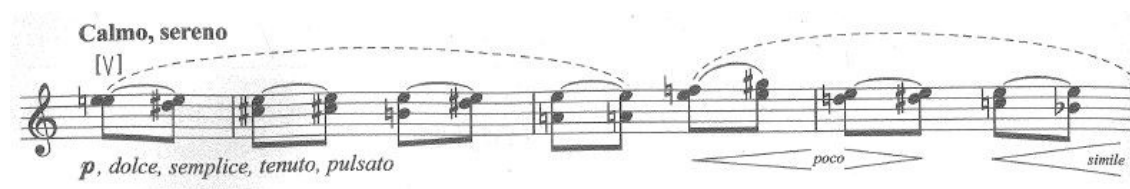
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<sup>88</sup> András Wilhelm, “György Kurtág: In memoriam Tamás Blum,” Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique, <http://brahms.ircam.fr/works/work/9774/> (accessed August 6, 2017).

<sup>89</sup> Paul Griffiths, “Programme Notes: SOLI,” Liner notes for *SOLI*, Tamsin Waley-Cohen, Signum Classics, SIGCD416, 2015, CD, <http://www.signumrecords.com/products/booklets/SIGCD416booklet.pdf> (accessed June 23, 2016).

<sup>90</sup> Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages* for violin.

Figure I: “In memoriam Blum Tamás” from *Signs, Games and Messages*, system 1.



The direction *pulsato* suggests that this line (bars 1-6, bars 8.5-10.5) is not to be played entirely *legato* (smoothly). The experimentation process revealed several ways to create *pulsato*; by weighting the start of each double-stop and decaying over the duration of the note, by rearticulating the start of each double-stop, and by tilting the bow away from the drone (A-string) at the end of each double stop. This last technique works by carving out the melody by slightly tilting the bow out of the melody (A-string) and onto the drone (open E-string) at the end of each note.

The performance practice on this particular issue is divided with performers using a combination or selection of the methods described above. Kashkashian plays these bars with a smooth articulation, no tilting to one string, and no extra pulsing weight. Similar to Kashkashian, Waley-Cohen plays with a smooth articulation, no tilting the bow to one string, but extra bow weight at the start of notes. Koh on the other hand, uses smooth articulation and no extra weight but distinctly tilts out of the A string to create *pulsato*. Pogossian, Kufferath and Barbetti all create sharper articulation in this phrase; Pogossian also employs a small separation between double stops, but no extra weight or tilt. Elisabeth Kufferath employs the tilt and extra weight, while Maurizio Barbetti does not lift out, but separates the double stops with a *martele*-style bow stroke, creating an entirely different articulation from the other performers. In the style most similar to Koh, Jennings suggested tilting out of the A string to emphasize the *pulsato*. This *pulsato* has been rendered in performance with tilt to the drone string, as well as extra weight at the beginning of double stops. While the tilt, in

particular, is contrary to the recorded performance consensus, it comes from a process of experimentation within the bounds of the notation, which Kurtág encourages, and is sensitive to the sensibility of the piece.

The tempo for “In memoriam Blum Tamás” has been interpreted relatively consistently despite the work’s extreme change in character. As the character transitions from calm to agonizing, forward momentum is created through changes in dynamics, articulation, vibrato, directional phrasing and sound quality, rather than merely increasing the tempo. To maximize dynamic intensity in such passages Jennings suggested full bows with attack from the air, which is retained in the performance. By maintaining a relatively consistent pulse in the first large section, the second section becomes timeless and almost barren by comparison.

Jennings also made general comments about interpreting and performing *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin. He suggested experimenting with micro-level or a ‘European’ approach to phrasing. The general concept works by practicing an exaggerate phrasing and then removing it completely – a method which Kurtág practices as a teacher and performer. As Jennings described, this method has a subtle and desirable effect:

And you get this with a lot of European musicians who work a whole lot of detail in. I remember this one conductor who was getting us to put a lot of hairpins in Mozart, and as you know, Mozart doesn’t write much except for *piano* and *forte* most of the time, and he’d say hairpin here and there, and stress this note, and then he’d say, “ok that’s really nice but it’s too much now, so now just take it away, pretend I didn’t ask for it.” And then what you get then is this thumbnail trace where you’ve written something in and then rubbed it out, and yet you still see a little bit of it there, and it still influences how you phrase some little thing, ever so slightly, even if you’ve been told not to do it anymore, the fact that you’ve done it once, or even a bunch of times,

it's like "I asked you to do that shape, now I just want to suggest that shape."<sup>91</sup>

Jennings suggested that this method could assist in cultivating an appreciation of detail in phrasing. Furthermore, this method illuminates Kurtág's practice of workshopping pieces, in which micro-level experimentation is the predominant activity of the session. As Jennings reflected:

So some of that... it's a bit oogie boogie, but it stays with you and part of eventually your interpretation... seeing that detail of possibilities in the music ... that's part of him [Kurtág] making people play one phrase for an hour... really go through a whole lot of possibilities, of how to phrase one little thing, and you'll eventually like one thing more than others, and you'll get some consistency with it. And then he won't like it because you're too consistent.<sup>92</sup>

Finally, Jennings noted that, while this method may be strategically utilised to cultivate a detailed phrase and phrasing options, it would be against Kurtág's philosophy for the performer to commit to an interpretational decision too early in the learning process. Kurtág often describes this quality as *esitando* (hesitant) and explains to Bálint András Varga how this concept is linked to his teaching and composing;

Varga: That reminds me: you often want the music to be played *esitando*. Why?

Kurtág: I do not like people to be dead sure of what they want. I should like to teach them (not necessarily with *esitando*) to wait before they decide they know. They should learn to think before making a decision. This is also the description of a compositional process: I look for a note and, perhaps, I will eventually find it. I may

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<sup>91</sup> Jennings, interview, November 1, 2015.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.



fail. Perhaps the piece is nothing more than the attempt to find it.<sup>93</sup>

The process of searching without the certainty of success is at the core of Kurtág's performing, teaching and composing philosophy. This philosophy is nicely encapsulated by a quote from Franz Kafka set to music by Kurtág in *Kafka Fragments*: "There is a goal, but no path to it. What we call a path is hesitation."<sup>94</sup> As argued by Willson, this philosophy is connected to his "Central European" identity; the musical work is unreachable, but the attempt and eventual failure to reach it is central to the interpretive process. 'Success', on the other hand, could mean capitulating to communist propaganda or commercial profit.<sup>95</sup>

### **Performance Reflection**

*Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin represented the beginning and conclusion of this research; it was the initial repertoire for Recital 1 and was subsequently rerecorded during the final months of my candidature.

Major interpretive concepts, such as Kurtág's the use of ambiguous notational signs, his preference for flexible interpretations and his hidden personal references influenced the interpretation of these works. The rehearsal process focused on the search for the "interior quality" of the notes through multiple micro-level phrasing possibilities, and gestural approaches. These gestural approaches effected tone quality, "highlighted identities" and reflected Kurtág's interest in the ritual of performance.

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<sup>93</sup> Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages*, 49.

<sup>94</sup> Willson, "The Mind is a Free Creature."

<sup>95</sup> Willson, "A Study in Geography, 'Tradition', and Identity in Concert Practice," 613.

In rehearsal for “Doloroso Garzulyéknak,” two characters were differentiated as much as possible, with a saccharine vibrato on the sections marked *dolce*, and senza vibrato on the phrases marked *senza colore* or *eco*, in addition to differing bow weight and contact point. In performance this interpretation was effective in differentiating the two characters, but on reflection, I recommend that the contrast be even starker. The rehearsal process focussed on experimenting with different fermata lengths while maintaining the hierarchy of “The Signs” and organic phrasing at the beginning and conclusion of phrases. In performance, the hierarchy of fermata length was accurately represented, and organic phrasing assisted to create a speech-like structure to the movement. The silent fermatas were interpreted as physical stillness, with minimal preparation into the next phrase. This worked well in performance and is a recommended interpretive idea.

The interpretation for “Hommage á J.S.B.” focused on creating a sense of flow while still emphasizing the different rhythmic groups and the counterpoint of the two whole-tone scales. In performance, this interpretation was achieved through a small decay of sound over each slur (instead of sustaining the sound throughout) and a forward-moving lilt. While my interpretative aim and rehearsal process focussed on differentiating the “pure” fifths through changes in tone quality, this had an overly subtle effect in performance. This interpretive aim would only be able to be rendered through significant changes in bowing which was not desired outcome and not recommended for performance.

The interpretation of “In memoriam Blum Tamás” focused on creating *pulsate* by separating the melody from the drone and weighting the beginning of each double stop. This worked well in performance, though inadvertent movement in my upper body could have been minimised better convey the *calmo* character. The rehearsal process concentrated on

transforming the initial *calmo* character while retaining the same pulse through the use of different articulation and density of sound; this worked well in performance and is recommended interpretive process.

The four following pieces were not discussed in Chapter 2 but were included in Recital 1 and merit a brief reflection. The opening of “Perpetuum mobile” was interpreted as a series of powerful, surprising gestures interrupted by the fermatas marked *erstarren* (frozen). This worked well in performance, but more freedom in the right-arm could further assist this gesture. In rehearsal, clarity of string crossings and sudden changes of dynamic were given priority in the perpetual motion section. This assisted in the sense of flow, but less clarity in the string crossings could have created a wilder character. In the final section, the interpretation focused on core sound quality and ‘Hungarian’ speech rhythms. This worked well in performance and are recommended interpretive ideas.

“Népdalféle” (in the style of a folk song) is atypical of Kurtág’s compositional style, employing constant rhythm, generous dynamics and a stately character. A rich and easeful tone production as well as two bar phrasing was accentuated in this performance. In the “Carenza Jig” effective and instant changes in dynamics and timbre were prioritised. The composer’s instructions to sound like “the screeching of a bird of prey” in bars 7-8 and bars 16-17 gave precedence to an intensity of timbre. In performance this timbral intensity could have been pushed further with the use of more bow weight and sharper articulation. In “Anziksz Kellerannának” (Postcard to Anna Keller) the interpretation was inspired by the dedicatee – the young daughter of András Keller. A playful character with boundless energy was successfully rendered using fast vibrato, fast bow speed, and rhythmic vitality.

This chapter discussed the challenges of interpreting and performing selected works from *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin by György Kurtág. The reception and practice surrounding the broader collection of *Signs, Games and Messages* was discussed, as many critics doubted the ‘seriousness’ or validity of these compositions. This chapter, however, suggests otherwise. The very title of this collection reveals some fundamental elements to understanding how to interpret his music: the use of ambiguous signs, the game of interpretation, and the messages hidden throughout create a sound world open to symbolic possibilities. Jennings identified these elements as vital to the interpretive practice of *Signs, Games and Messages*, and highlighted processes that assists the performer to access its symbolic possibilities. In particular, experimenting with a variety of micro-level phrasing options “highlights identities” and develops the “interior quality” of the note. This “interior quality” can also be cultivated through a gestural approach to interpretation: Jennings argues that a gestural interpretation and the accompanying preparatory movements have a direct influence on sound production, particularly for the cultivation of a fragile sound world. This gestural interpretation reflects Kurtág’s interest in the ritual of performance, which he highlights by the placement and hierarchy of “The Signs.” The performer is therefore put in a position of heightened interpretive responsibility; their interpretation of “The Signs” must materialise the symbolic possibilities and show the deeper structure of each movement.

### Chapter Three - *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio

This chapter discusses the interpretation and performance of four selected movements from *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio: “Virág - Zsigmondy Dénesnek,” “Ligatura Y,” “...féerie d'automne,” and “Virág az ember, Mijakónak.” As *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio is part of the *Játékok* collection, this discussion draws from and strengthens central interpretive concepts from Chapter 2. Additionally, the investigation of Kurtág’s interpretive framework in a chamber music setting reveals that much of his music can be interpreted conversationally. This chapter argues that this conversational quality permeates both the horizontal relationship between the parts and the linear character of an individual part. These arguments and other interpretive and technical considerations are developed through analysis of recordings by Ensemble Epomeo, the Orlando Trio and members of the Keller Quartet, and in consultation with Graeme Jennings and Peter Tanfield.

*Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio is comprised of eleven short movements for violin, viola and cello, written from 1989 onwards. Six movements have been selected to perform; “Virág az ember, Mijakónak” (2001) “Hommage á J.S.B.” (not dated), “Ligatura Y” (1995, rev. 1998), “Virág - Zsigmondy Dénesnek” (1994, rev. 2005), “Hommage a Ránki György” (Pizzicato-keringő) (1998) and “...féerie d'automne” (2004). Willson says of this collection of pieces;

One can hardly call this work a "string trio": it is more like a conversation between three players, a conversation which sometimes attains synthesis, as in "Ligatura Y," and is sometimes disfunctional [sic] or obstruse, as in “Hommage à John Cage” (faltering words). The movements are short: they were often composed in one sweep

on a single afternoon, in response to news, a mood or a thought. In their resultant abundance they have been compared to diary entries.<sup>96</sup>

Indeed, like *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin, this string trio collection includes many dedications or references to important figures in Kurtág's life, including Miyakó Furiya, J.S. Bach, The Orlando Trio, Dénes and Anneliese Nissen Zsigmondy, Walter Levin, György Ránki and György Kroó. Kurtág's insistence that many movements from the *Játékok* collection as personal messages highlights their ongoing importance and relevance to his legacy. Four of the above movements have been rewritten for the string trio instrumentation from other collections; "Hommage á J.S.B." is from *Játékok* Volume 8 for piano four hand, "Ligatura Y" is from *Játékok* Volume 6 for solo piano, "Virág - Zsigmondy Dénesnek" is from *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo viola, and "...féeerie d'automne" is from *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin.

*Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio is one of Kurtág's lesser known work and rarely performed or recorded. Recordings of selected movements have been made by Ensemble Epomeo,<sup>97</sup> the Orlando Trio,<sup>98</sup> and a trio comprising of members from the Keller Quartet: András Keller (violin) Zoltán Gál (viola) and Judit Szabó (cello).<sup>99</sup> All three ensembles have had contact with Kurtág at some point, but did not necessarily receive advice before or regarding these specific recordings. Interestingly, Ensemble Epomeo worked with Kurtág only after recording the trio, but had positive feedback from Kurtág about their interpretation.<sup>100</sup> Hungarian violinist András Keller, who premiered the majority of Kurtág's

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<sup>96</sup> Willson, "Kurtág in Edinburgh."

<sup>97</sup> *schnittke – weinberg – kurtág – penderecki*, Ensemble Epomeo, Avie, AV2315, 2014, CD.

<sup>98</sup> *György Kurtág: Signs, Games and Messages*, Hiromi Kikuchi, Ken Hakii, Stefan Metz, ECM Records, ECM 1730, 2003, CD.

<sup>99</sup> *György Kurtág – Musik Für Streichinstrumente*, Keller Quartet, ECM Records, ECM1598, 1996, CD.

<sup>100</sup> Kenneth Woods, e-mail message to Coombe, March 27, 2017.

violin works in the 1980s-90s, said of his relationship to the composer, “I came to Beethoven and to a lot of other composers through Kurtág. I'm extremely happy that I had the occasion to spend a lot of my life with such an artist. He was, for example, the teacher of chamber music when I was a kid.”<sup>101</sup> The Orlando Trio, comprised of Hiromi Kikuchi (violin), Ken Hakii (viola) and Stephan Metz (cello), represent the younger generation of Kurtág specialists; Kikuchi and Hakii have premiered a number of Kurtág's works and toured with the György and Marta. Kurtág says of working with Kikuchi and Hakii on a previous work;

I was in permanent contact with the two soloists, Hiromi and Ken. As soon as I had completed a section, I faxed them the relevant pages and they learned them immediately. Then, if I changed or recomposed it, they learned that too. They were wonderfully selfless, ready for any self-sacrifice.<sup>102</sup>

As such, two works in this collection (“Hommage á J.S.B.” and “...féerie d’automne”) are dedicated to them.

Graeme Jennings and Peter Tanfield provided interpretive insight into *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio. While Tanfield has not worked with Kurtág directly, he has attended masterclasses given by Kurtág as well as performed a number of his works. Tanfield was born in England and studied throughout Europe with teachers Igor Ozim, Felix Andrievski, Alberto Lysy, Herman Krebbers and Yehudi Menuhin. A prize-winner of international competitions, Peter Tanfield moved to Australia in 1998 to lead the Australian String Quartet,

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<sup>101</sup> Anderson, 107.

<sup>102</sup> Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages*, 76.

and has held teaching positions at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts and the Tasmanian Conservatorium of Music, University of Tasmania.<sup>103</sup>

Tanfield encountered Kurtág and his music through a masterclass at International Musicians Seminar at Prussia Cove, Cornwall. Kurtág regularly attended this festival as a chamber music coach, and Tanfield attended one of his masterclasses as an audience member.<sup>104</sup>

Tanfield reported that during the masterclass Kurtág was quiet, focussed and contained, and had a clear, precise concept of what he wanted. He was intent on communicating the musical gesture and bringing out the character, and preferred to demonstrate on piano rather than give verbal direction. Tanfield was deeply moved by Kurtág's music, and greatly regrets not speaking to him while he had the chance.<sup>105</sup> This masterclass inspired Tanfield to explore Kurtág's compositions, and he has performed *String Quartet No. 1*, Opus 1 (1959) and *Samuel Beckett: What is the Word?* (1990–1991) for solo alto (speaker), mixed voices and chamber ensemble.

### **“Virág - Zsigmondy Dénesnek”**

**... in memoriam Anneliese Nissen-Zsigmondy (1994, rev. 2005)**

“Virág - Zsigmondy Dénesnek” retains a slow and subdued character throughout the entire movement. The violin, viola and cello alternate in playing a single two-note chord which slides slightly up and down, which according to Kurtág's instructions, should resemble groaning. Broken by heavy silences, the groaning continues before morphing into a duo

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<sup>103</sup> University of Tasmania, “Peter Tanfield: Lecturer in Strings and Community Outreach,” University of Tasmania, <http://www.utas.edu.au/profiles/staff/tasmanian-college-arts/peter-tanfield>, (accessed February 2, 2017).

<sup>104</sup> Peter Tanfield, interview with Coombe, Hobart, Tasmania, November 17, 2016.

<sup>105</sup> Tanfield, interview, November 17, 2016.



section. A short chorale section has all three instruments playing in dispersed registers, before returning to the ‘groan-like’ chords and ending with a whimper. This movement is highly conversational, not only in the mimicry of the human voice but in the way that instruments hocket solo lines and expressive moments are given textural clarity so that the speaking voice can come to the fore.

This title of this movement translates as “Flower for Dénes Zsigmondy... in memoriam Anneliese Nissen-Zsigmondy” and refers to Dénes Zsigmondy, a Hungarian violinist (1922-2014) who was an international soloist, teacher and founder of the Holzhauser Musiktage festival in Bavaria.<sup>106</sup> This movement was written upon the death of his wife, Anneliese Nissen-Zsigmondy, who was a pianist and his chamber music partner. Kurtág often uses the title ‘flower’ for short movements that perhaps share similar sentiments or musical elements, saying “For me, harmony is melody pressed like a flower.”<sup>107</sup>

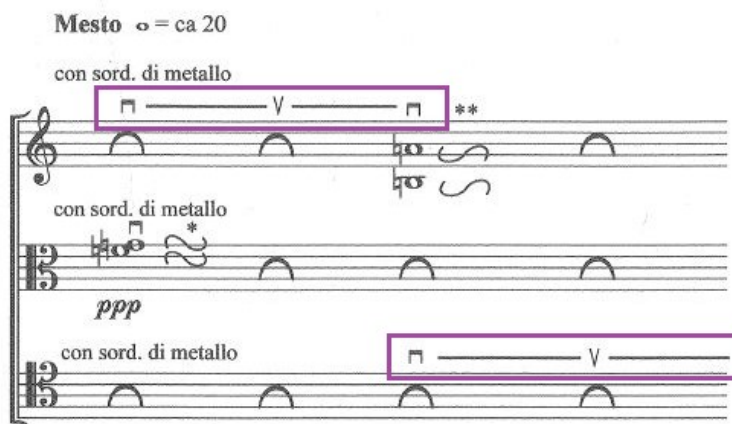
This movement presents two interpretational challenges; an ambiguous notation and a difference of interpretation of the ‘groans’ in some recordings. The ambiguous notation occurs four times, always before the entry of a ‘groan’, and is marked as a sustained down and up bow during the silence of a fermata;

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<sup>106</sup> "Hungarian Violinist and Teacher Dénes Zsigmondy Has Died Aged 91." *The Strad*, March 7, 2014. <https://www.thestrad.com/2961.article> (accessed March 10, 2017).

<sup>107</sup> Varga, György Kurtág: *Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages*, 16.

Figure J: “Virág - Zsigmondy Dénesnek” from *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio, system 2.<sup>108</sup>

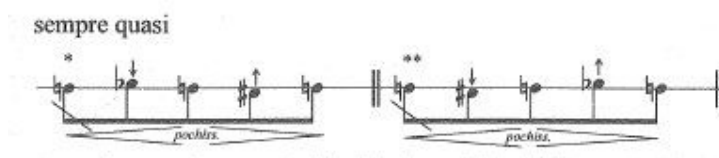


This notation does not appear in the performance key, in any string work examined in this research, nor *Kafka Fragments*, *Hommage à András Mihály 12 microludes for string quartet* or *Ligatura-Message to Frances-Marie*. In the recordings by Ensemble Epomeo and the Orlando Trio there is no audible noise during this notation, and as the recordings are limited to audio (not video), there is no visual indicator of their interpretation of this notation. Jennings, who had never encountered this notation either, suggested the notation represents air bowing; moving the bow in the specified directions without engaging the string. In absence of any contradictory evidence, this interpretation is convincing from a gestural standpoint; if the double-stop is meant to represent a ‘groan’, the two air bows can represent the breath. In this case, a conversational or speech-like reading of Kurtág’s notation enhances symbolic possibilities.

<sup>108</sup> All score examples in Chapter 2 from György Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio, (Budapest, Editio Musica Budapest, 2005) unless stated otherwise.

The second interpretational challenge regards the left and right-hand execution of the ‘groans.’ As can be seen in Figure K, Kurtág is unusually specific in his composer’s note. There are two types of ‘groans’; they either begin with an upwards or downwards inflection, and should be “Quasi vibrato lento. In a slow vibrato, shift away from the main note by a quartertone or less. Should resemble groaning.”

Figure K: Composer’s note: “Virág - Zsigmondy Dénesnek” from *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio.



Kurtág asks for a ‘slow vibrato’ to move a quartertone or less from the central note, incorporating a small crescendo in the middle of the note. In the experimental process, two methods of rendering this groan were examined; the first used miniscule *glissando* involving forearm movement, the second using a wide wrist vibrato with minimal forearm movement. The wide wrist vibrato was preferred as it rendered the groan more organically. Recordings of this passage exposed a difference in bow use; Maurizio Barbetti (in the version for solo viola) takes two bows for each chord,<sup>109</sup> whereas Ensemble Epomeo and the Orlando Trio take one. After incorporating both into the experimental process, one bow was preferred for recordings; if the bows directions represented breath, and groans are produced with one breath, then one bow better represents the symbolic interpretation. Indeed, this highly evocative movement also invites a speculation on the relationship of those mentioned;

<sup>109</sup> György Kurtág: *Signs, Games and Messages*, Maurizio Barbetti, Mode Records, MO230, 2010, CD.

Anneliese Nissen-Zsigmondy, Dénes Zsigmondy and Kurtág himself. Differing interpretations of these relationships assist in cultivating a variety of interpretive options.

### “Ligatura Y” (1995, rev. 1998)

“Ligatura Y” is a slow, calm, chorale-like movement that initially revolves around D minor and D major chords. Harmonic colour is gradually increased through the addition of non-tonal notes and solo melodies for each instrument. It builds in dramatic intensity with the introduction of a *sul ponticello*<sup>110</sup> section marked *beklemmt, con angoscia*<sup>111</sup> and increases in tension with *forte* chords in the upper string and Bartok pizzicato in the cello before ending calmly in open fifths. This movement has been rewritten for string trio from the sixth volume of *Játékok* for solo piano (1993), and has also been rewritten for solo accordion in collaboration with Teodoro Anzellotti.<sup>112</sup>

In his article discussing Kurtág’s piece *Ligatura-Message to Frances-Marie (The answered unanswered question)* op. 31/b, Grégoire Tosser notes that Kurtág’s ‘ligatures’ all share similar qualities. According to Tosser, *Ligatura X* for solo piano (1993), *Ligature e versetti*, for organ (1990) and *Varga Bálint Ligatúrāja* (2007) all “celebrate slowness...The components are reduced to a bare minimum and the development takes place within a single

<sup>110</sup> This term instructs the player to move the contact point towards the bridge, bringing out higher harmonics and creating a ‘scratchy’ or ‘nasal’ tone quality.

<sup>111</sup> The term “beklemmt”, (German) means “oppressed” or “anguished” and is most famously used in Beethoven’s String Quartet in Bb op.130. “Con angoscia” (Italian) translates to “with anguish.” By using such historically laden terms, Kurtág ensures that the performer will make an association with the Beethoven String Quartet.

“Beklemmt,” *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/02545> (accessed September 15, 2017).

<sup>112</sup> Teodoro Anzellotti, *Hungarian Diary: Ligeti, Kurtág, Liszt*, Winter & Winter, 910 212-2, 2014, CD.

fragment.”<sup>113</sup> This observation is certainly true of “Ligatura Y,” which is not only slow, but sparse in material and texture. According to Thomas Bösche, the title “Ligatura Y” refers to a sign used in mediaeval mensural notation to combine closely connected notes, as well as a sequence of harmonies, such as used by Girolamo Frescobaldi.<sup>114</sup>

The interpretive focus of this movement was to communicate the dragging feeling (marked “Drag”) and foreground the instrument marked *poco in rilievo* (a little in relief). The dragging feeling was achieved with a heavy, thick, sound with a fuller body in the middle of the note. Tanfield argued that creating the ‘dragging’ shape and finding the pulse were intrinsically linked, saying; “if you subdivide the meter too much it gets dangerous as you lose orientation of the feeling, the pulse is definitely a minim pulse, not a crotchet pulse.”<sup>115</sup> In this sense, Tanfield clarified the connection between the ‘dragging’ shape and the pulse, and warned against showing subdivision.

The general tempo of this movement has varied significantly in recording; indeed, Kurtág gives no tempo marking for this movement. Ensemble Epomeo play at minim = 30 and generally increase in tempo throughout the movement. The Keller Quartet ensemble take the fastest tempo, at minim = 35, with tempo pushing forward and pulling back depending of the direction of the phrase. The Orlando Trio play at the moderate tempo of minim = 28, and while they push forward and pull back in tempo, they do it to a lesser degree than the Keller

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<sup>113</sup> Grégoire Tosser, “Links and Ligatures: György Kurtág’s ‘Ligatura-Message to Frances-Marie’ (‘the Answered Unanswered Question’), Op. 31b.,” *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43, no. 3/4 (2002): 439-449, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/902601>, 449.

<sup>114</sup> Thomas Bösche, “György Kurtág’s Late Works,” Liner notes for *György Kurtág: Signs, Games and Messages*, Hiromi Kikuchi, Ken Hakii, Stefan Metz, ECM Records, ECM1730, 2003, CD.

<sup>115</sup> Tanfield, interview, March 30, 2017.

Quartet. Both Teodoro Anzellotti (accordion) and Gábor Csalog (piano) have worked with Kurtág extensively; their recordings of “Ligatura Y” for their respective instruments also vary considerably, with Anzellotti at *minim* = 17 and Csalog at roughly *minim* = 32. My trio aimed to play at approximately *minim* = 30 and with a “dragging” shape on each note rather than dragging the overall tempo.

Another interpretive focus in this movement was the foregrounding of the *poco in rilievo* part and the meaning of dotted slurs. The harmonic content of the part marked *poco in rilievo* or ‘solo’ is the most interesting and least static of the three parts. The relation between the three parts can be interpreted as conversational; there is one leading voice while the two others remain in the background. The leading voice changes so each voice can lead the conversation at different points. This conversational quality leads to a symbolic reading of this movement – in this case, I have interpreted the ensemble dynamic created by *poco in rilievo* as a Greek chorus; with the two background voices providing commentary on the direction of the leading voice. Kurtág’s markings, including *poco in rilievo* or ‘solo’, and *poco più sonore* (a little more sonorous) are evocative without being specific to the performer; likewise, in the notation, the use of a dotted slur within another dotted slur alludes to certain phrasing possibilities with no clear technical or character directive. In regard to this latter point, Kurtág primarily uses dotted slurs to indicate phrases, saying in his performance notes for *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio “Long slurs mean phrasing, not bowing!”<sup>116</sup> However, the use of a dotted slur within another is unusual in Kurtág’s writing. As seen below, these occur in the cellos opening phrase, and appear throughout the movement.

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<sup>116</sup> György Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio.

Figure L: “Ligatura Y” from *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio, bars 1-3.

Drag

3 [V]

4

3

*p, semplice*

[V]

*p, semplice*

[V]

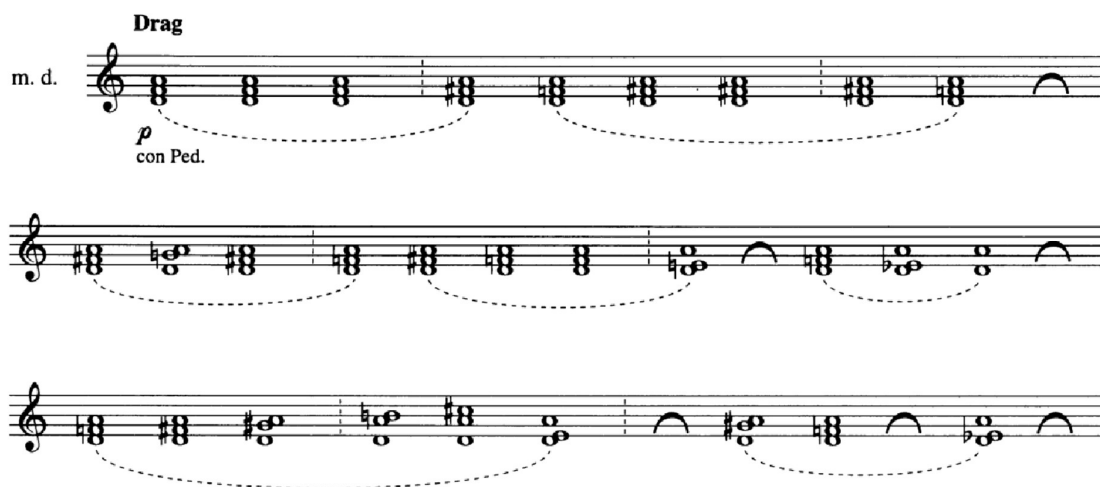
[ V V V simile al fine]

*p, semplice*  
*poco in rilievo*

As seen above, Kurtág has suggested alternate bowing directions for the entire movement, which would then suggest to the performer to interpret the nested dotted slurs as smaller phrases within a bigger phrase. However, as Kurtág’s bowing directions appear as an *ossia* this suggests multiple solutions. Indeed, recordings of this movement and the original piano score show differences in phrasing and bowing.

As seen in the example below, these nested dotted slurs do not appear in the original piano version.

Figure M: “Ligatura Y” from *Játékok*, vol. 6.<sup>117</sup>



The non-inclusion of these dotted slurs in the original point towards a number of explanations; it could be argued that, after hearing performances of the solo version, Kurtág thought this additional phrasing needed to be made more explicit. This would fit a chronological timeline, as the original piano version was composed in 1993 while the trio version was composed in 1995 (revised 1998).<sup>118</sup> It could also be argued, however, that the addition of this nested dotted slur in the string trio version is because of slurring technique available to string instruments. This line of interpretation suggests that, due to string technique, these slurs can be interpreted as phrasing *and* bowing.

From a close critical listening, it appears that Keller’s ensemble treats these nested dotted slurs as both phrasing and bowing, whereas Ensemble Epomeo and The Orlando Trio mix

<sup>117</sup> György Kurtág, *Játékok*, Volume 6, (Budapest, Editio Musica Budapest, 2010).

<sup>118</sup> Tosser, “Links and Ligatures: György Kurtág’s ‘Ligatura-Message to Frances-Marie,’” 447.



between phrasing, bowing and both at once. As all ensembles have had a close collaborative relationship with Kurtág and reached different interpretations, it suggests flexibility in this regard to this notation.

As a result of the experimental rehearsal process, we have interpreted these nested dotted slurs case by case; we treated bars 2-3 and 9 as phrasing, not bowing, and bar 11 as phrasing and bowing (see Figure N).

Figure N: “Ligatura Y” from *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio, bars 10-14.

The musical score for "Ligatura Y" from *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio, bars 10-14, is shown. The score is for Violin (V), Viola (V), and Cello/Double Bass (C). The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The time signature is 3/4. The score shows measures 10 through 14. Measure 10 has a 'solo' marking and a 'poco più sonore, cantabile' instruction. Measures 11 and 12 are highlighted with a purple box. Measure 13 has a 'rinf.' marking. Measure 14 has a 'molto p, dolce' marking. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, dotted slurs, and dynamic markings.

In this passage, the viola and cello crescendo to the biggest peak in the movement so far. The treatment of the nested dotted slurs as bowings assist to build in a resistance; the slurs mean that the bow needs to be slowed and weighted to achieve a crescendo, rather than separating them and using more bow speed and length. This resistance assists to create a desirable intensity to the passage. This literal resistance also is linked to technical or interpretational resistance, as discussed by Marta;

Marta Kurtág: One of your [Kurtág's] principal discoveries was that in instrumental performance, a resistance has to be fitted in, the easy solution is not the right one.

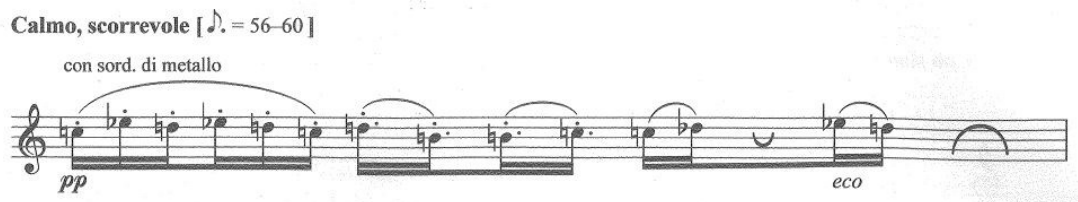
György Kurtág: Yes, but I put the resistance into works differently for different performers. My goal is exactly as Marta says, but for each person, the threshold is in a different place.<sup>119</sup>

Kurtág's willingness to seek different solutions for different performers frames his music as a dialogue between the composer, the performer, and the score. Kurtág's desire to seek solutions that require some resistance can be viewed as a way to create new interpretive possibilities and create symbolic possibilities for a range of different performers.

### “...féerie d'automne” (2004)

“...féerie d'automne” (...autumn fairy-tale) is a delicate, fragmentary work; the violin predominantly carries the melodic voice, while the viola and cello fill out the violin line with harmonics and *battuto* (hit) notes. “...féerie d'automne” is a reworking of a piece by the same title from *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin, however, in this case, there is much more new material than in other arrangements by Kurtág. Figure O and Figure P shows the comparison between the solo violin and trio version.

Example O: “...féerie d'automne” from *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin, system 1.<sup>120</sup>



<sup>119</sup> Varga, György Kurtág: *Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages*, 30.

<sup>120</sup> György Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin.

Example P: “...féerie d’automne” from *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio, system 1.

Calmo, scorrevole ♩. = ca 56–60

con sord. di metallo

pp eco come prima

con sord. di metallo

IV pp eco IV come prima

con sord. di metallo

pp II I II eco III come prima

As can be seen in Figure P, a slurred staccato articulation in combination with a metal mute is exploited to create a distant, moving effect. The addition of the metal mute radically changes the articulation needed to create the shortened sound; string players generally play with rubber mutes and are not familiar with the metallic variety. Jennings highlighted this problem and coached us to use a dryer, *martelé* stroke to achieve the desired articulation.

Peter Tanfield emphasized the importance of achieving a flowing direction within each phrase, saying; “Sing through the sound a bit more... I don’t mean that in a lyrical way, but you move through the sound in a way which helps you feel in three or four, rather than six or eight.”<sup>121</sup> Both Tanfield and Jennings encouraged a faster tempo than marked for this movement. While neither Ensemble Epomeo, the Orlando Trio or members of the Keller Quartet had recorded this particular movement, recordings have been made of the solo violin version by Movses Pogossian and Elisabeth Kufferath. Pogossian stayed at the tempo marked (dotted quaver = 56) while Kufferath took a lively tempo at dotted quaver = 82.

<sup>121</sup> Peter Tanfield, interview with Coombe, Hobart, Tasmania, March 30, 2017.

This faster tempo assisted to create a conversational quality to individual (linear) parts.

Tanfield argued that the multitude of short, fragmented lines can be given speech-like inflections. These inflections can be easily varied, and assist in creating symbolic possibilities in this movement. Taking these recommendations into account, “...féerie d’automne” will be recorded at a faster tempo than marked, with fragmented lines given speech-like inflections.

Both Tanfield and Jennings brought our attention to this intriguing passage;

Example Q: “...féerie d’automne” from *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio, system 5.

The image shows a musical score for a string trio (Violin, Viola, and Cello) from the piece "Signs, Games and Messages" by Kurtág. The system is labeled "Example Q: '...féerie d'automne' from Signs, Games and Messages for string trio, system 5." The score is written for three staves. The Violin staff (top) is marked "molto vibr." and "perdendosi". The Viola staff (middle) has a "2" above it. The Cello staff (bottom) is marked "sempre mormorando, scorrevole [quasi niente]" and has a "4" below it. The music is in a key with one flat and a 3/4 time signature.

Both Tanfield and Jennings advised that the pitches in cello line, marked *sempre mormorando, scorrevole, [quasi niente]* (always mumbling, gliding, [almost nothing]), should not be too clean or clear to create a mumbling effect. The violin line should complement the timbre and energy of the cello by using a wide, fast vibrato and light, fast bow. These two instruments create a backgrounded speech-like quality, the muddled intonation of a discussion heard through the wall in an adjacent room. Tanfield and Jennings advised that the viola melody should cut through this background noise; perhaps symbolically one clear voice cutting through the others. The marking *mormorando* (mumbling) is another example of Kurtág’s interest in incorporating speech-like elements into his music.

### **“Virág az ember, Mijakónak” (2001)**

Translating to “We are flowers – to Miyakó”, the meaning of this title is ambiguous as there is no existing information about the dedication of this piece. The most likely explanation is a dedication to Dr Miyakó Furiya, a pianist and choral director who studied at the Franz Liszt Academy with Kurtág with Kurtág in the 1980s.<sup>122</sup>

“Virág az ember, Mijakónak” has a tranquil and mysterious character, with the violin playing slow, scalar figures while the viola and cello sustain underneath. Jennings advised being aware of the dramatic contour of each scale, saying;

These scales – where are they going? Play it in such a way as that you’re not giving the game away... we don’t know what’s coming next. You’re playing a scale but we don’t know whether it’s going to keep going up, going to stop somewhere, or going back down. So that D-flat is going to be really surprising because we don’t know that it’s part of the scale yet. He doesn’t reveal the harmony until much later.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> “FURIYA Miyako,” <http://researchmap.jp/read0169410/?lang=english>, (accessed August 8, 2017).

<sup>123</sup> Graeme Jennings, interview with Coombe, Hobart, Tasmania, June 16, 2017.

Figure R: “Virág az ember, Mijakónak” from *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio, bars 1-2.

The image shows a musical score for a string trio (violin, viola, and cello) for the first two bars of a piece. The tempo is marked "Lento, placido" and the performance instruction is "Con sord. di metallo" (with mutes). The dynamic is "pppp". The violin part (top staff) has two measures, each with a purple box highlighting a specific interval. The viola part (middle staff) has two measures, each with a purple box highlighting a specific interval. The cello part (bottom staff) has two measures, each with a purple box highlighting a specific interval. Below the cello staff, there is a diagram of a bow with a circular arrow indicating a circular motion. To the right of the diagram, there is a list of translations for the instruction "Lassan körözni a vonóval a láb és a fogólap közepe között":

- Lassan körözni a vonóval
- a láb és a fogólap közepe között
- Langsame Kreisbewegung des Bogens zwischen dem Steg und der Mitte des Griffbretts
- Slow circling motion of the bow between the bridge and the middle of the frettboard

Corinne Ramey notes that Kim Kashkashian also echoed this sentiment when discussing the scalar material in Kurtág's *Signs* (Jelek) for solo viola;

She played the short pieces in largely chronological order, pausing between movements to talk about how Kurtág's musical language became sparser as time progressed. "At the end you're faced with a set of slow scales, which contain so much emotional material that you just can't believe that it's in something housed that simply," she says.<sup>124</sup>

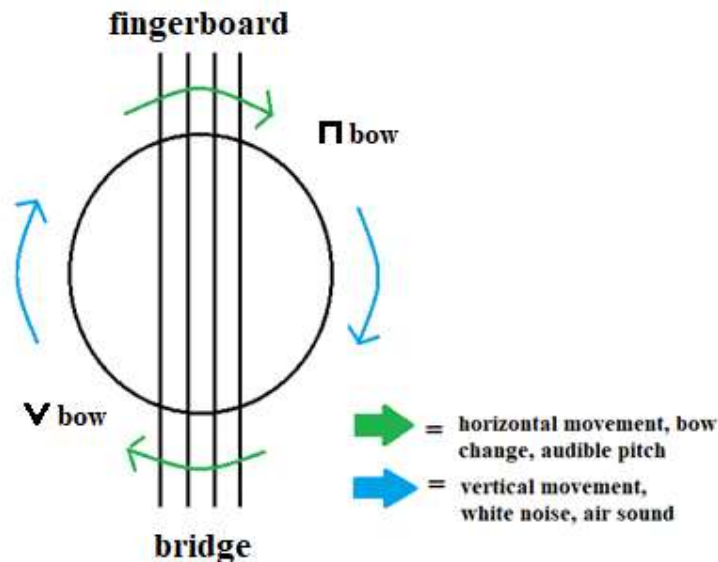
Another point of interpretive uncertainty is the circular bowing requested of the cellist in the second bar, which can be seen in Figure R. Jennings advised the cellist to incorporate some

<sup>124</sup> Ramey, "An Explorer's Mind," 43.

sounded pitch in addition to white noise produced naturally by the bow hair's contact with the string, explaining that the sounded pitch would be created by each bow change.

This technique is visually represented below: the four vertical lines are the cello strings, and the black circle represents the path of the bow. The green and blue represent approximately which positions will produce audible pitch and white noise/air sound.

Figure S: Diagram of circling motion of bow, from front-on perspective of cellist performing.<sup>125</sup>



This technique is also explained by contemporary violinist Irvine Arditti in his book *The Techniques of Violin Playing*, in reference to a piece by Helmut Lachemann;

There is an extended section in *Grido* where he requires the players to move the bow up and down the string, as well as incorporating some horizontal movement. This produces clear pitches that sound rather “muted,” along with the air-like noise of the bow moving vertically along the string.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>125</sup> Diagram by Coombe.

<sup>126</sup> Irvine Arditti and Robert HP Platz, *The Techniques of Violin Playing*, (Kassel: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 2013), 31.

These instructions clarify the “interior quality” and the techniques needed to achieve this sound.

### **Performance Reflection**

The recording project for *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio occurred after Recital 3, with both Jennings and Tanfield assisting in the development of the interpretation of these movements. The interpretation was influenced by those concepts that have recurred throughout this research; highlighting gestural elements, speech-like qualities, and the ‘ritual’ of performance. Additionally, the minimisation of preparatory movements and ‘body beating’ were prioritised.

In “*Virág - Zsigmondy Dénesnek*,” Kurtág’s unclear notation was interpreted as air bowing, further highlighting the ‘ritual’ of performance; this worked well and is a recommended interpretation. The glissando figure which Kurtág requested to sound like a groan was interpreted as such; this symbolism was highly effective, but I determined that, on reflection post-recording, the groan could have been wider in pitch to accentuate its grotesque character. This extra width would be enhanced by an arm vibrato instead of a wrist vibrato.

In “*Ligatura Y*” the recorded performance tempo matched expectations, at  $\text{minim} = 32$ , with fluctuations in tempo reflecting dramatic contour. I had planned to give the minims a bulging, dragging shape, but in retrospect this shape could have been highlighted more consistently. The instrument marked *in rilievo* (in relief) was successfully brought to the fore, the interpretation of this dynamic as a Greek chorus created a conversational quality. The interpretation of selected nested dotted slurs as bowings did not create the desired resistance



but rather pushed the tempo forward. This interpretation could be revised, though further communication could also address this problem.

The tempo of “...féerie d'automne” was interpreted deliberately faster than the marked tempo to assist in creating speech-like inflections for individual (linear) parts. This increase in tempo had the desired effect and is a recommended interpretation. As discussed with Jennings, additional shortness of stroke was used to compensate for the softening effect produced by the metal mutes. A wide variety of articulation and phrasing was produced within this shortened stroke to emphasize speech-like elements, and is recommended for performance. In consultation with Tanfield, the ensemble balance in the passage marked *mormorando, scorrevole, [quasi niente]* was readdressed in the viola’s favour; the interpretation of violin and cello as distant speech-like effects was convincing.

In “Virág az ember, Mijakónak,” Jennings suggested that, in the violin part, body movements and left-hand and right-hand preparation needed to be obscured to ensure that the scalar turns remained surprising for the objective listener. This was successfully achieved and is a recommended interpretive idea. The execution of circular bowing technique in the cello part incorporated both pitched and white noise, though could be increased in dynamic. This performance of this movement delivered the fragile sound world which is so characteristic of Kurtág’s writing.

“Hommage á J.S.B.” reflected similar interpretive decisions to its corresponding movement in Signs, Games and Messages for solo violin; a sense of flow, the emphasis of different rhythmic groups, and the counterpoint of the two whole-tone scales. In the trio version, rhythmic precision and the foregrounding of the violin line was prioritised. Some

improvements could be made on unison intonation for future performances. Kurtág's use of traditional pizzicato technique and a clear 3/4 pulse in "Hommage a Ránki György" (Pizzicato-keringő) made this movement more straightforward than others. A playful character, range of dynamics, and an ebb and flow of tempo was produced for this movement.

This chapter discussed the interpretive considerations and performance outcomes of selected movements from *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio. By analysing selected recordings by Ensemble Epomeo, the Orlando Trio, and members of the Keller Quartet, and through conversation with Jennings and Tanfield, important points from Chapter 2 were reiterated and built upon. In particular, Kurtág's use of "The Signs" to create interpretive ambiguity, his encouragement of divergent interpretations, and his reference to important figures in his life all suggest a symbolic interpretation of his works. This was best seen in the interpretation of ambiguous notation as "air bowings" in "Virág - Zsigmondy Dénesnek." New findings argued that much of Kurtág's ensemble writing is conversational - both in the horizontal relationship between the parts and the linear character of an individual part. Certain passages or motifs in *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio were interpreted to highlight speech-like elements, such as groaning or murmuring. Other passages were interpreted to emphasize a conversational dynamic, such as a Greek chorus commenting on the action of the solo line. These qualities demonstrate Kurtág's interest in language but also his interest in people; the multiple dedications that this collection contains, as well as Kurtág's willingness to adapt his music for new performers, adds another symbolic reading to consider when interpreting his works. Symbolic possibilities were also enhanced by a cultivation of a fragile sound world; the tone quality of this fragile sound world can be more suggestive, multi-dimensional and flexible than a projecting tone. The cultivation of this fragile sound world lead to explorations of techniques including the articulation possibilities

using metal mutes and circular bowings. The performance of these movements successfully delivered interpretational aims, though some decisions will be reconsidered for future performances.

## Chapter Four - *Tre Pezzi* (Three pieces) Op. 14e for violin and piano

This chapter discusses the interpretation and performance of Kurtág's *Tre Pezzi* (Three pieces) Op. 14e for violin and piano. Important interpretive concepts from Chapters 2 and 3 are reiterated, in particular, how Kurtág uses the “The Signs” used to highlight structure, and how the “interior quality” of the note can be reached through alternative techniques. These findings were reached through analysis of selected recordings by violinists Marta Abraham, Jennifer Koh, Joel Bardolet, and Augustin Hadelich, as well as interpretive guidance from Australian pianist Michael Kieran Harvey. This chapter also argues that a conversational interpretation of Kurtág's music is important, with harmonic tension and interplay between the violin and piano being a key feature of this work.

*Tre Pezzi* is made up of three movements of contrasting characters; “Öd und traurig” (Bleak and sad) is slow and gestural, while “Vivo” (Lively) has a dramatic, gypsy-like quality. The final movement, “Aus der Ferne” (In the distance) is marked *Sehr leise, äussert langsam* (Very quiet, extremely slow) and is eerie yet gentle. Written in 1979, there is little information available about the composition of this work. It is an arrangement of another work from the same year titled *Herdecker Eurythmie* op. 14b, for flute, violin, recitation and tenor lira (or vielle tenor)<sup>127</sup> – a mediaeval instrument which later developed into the hurdy-gurdy.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> “György Kurtág: Herdecker Eurythmie,” Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique, <http://brahms.ircam.fr/works/work/9765/> (accessed August 3, 2017).

<sup>128</sup> Francis Baines et al., “Hurdy-gurdy,” *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/13583>, (accessed September 15, 2017).

*Tre Pezzi* is one of Kurtág's more popular works for violin and has been recorded by Marta Abraham,<sup>129</sup> Jennifer Koh,<sup>130</sup> Joel Bardolet<sup>131</sup> and Augustin Hadelich.<sup>132</sup> Hungarian violinist Marta Abraham has worked with Kurtág, though it is unclear on what specific repertoire.<sup>133</sup> Jennifer Koh<sup>134</sup> and Augustin Hadelich<sup>135</sup> have not worked with Kurtág, while Joel Bardolet received second hand information about Kurtág through colleagues and teachers.<sup>136</sup> It is interesting to note that pianists who have worked with Kurtág on his solo piano cycle *Játékok* have not recorded *Tre Pezzi*, perhaps viewing this work as a "violinist's piece."

It was invaluable to workshop *Tre Pezzi* with Michael Kieran Harvey, an Australian pianist specialising in contemporary music. Harvey is a composer himself with works such as *48 Fugues for Frank*, *Psychosonata*, *Deus est Fabula* and *Aporia*, and has championed living Australian composers such as Carl Vine and Nigel Westlake. He was born in Sydney, and studied piano with Alan Jenkins and Gordon Watson. In the early 1980s, he moved to Budapest and studied at the Franz Liszt Academy under Sándor Falvai.<sup>137</sup>

In an interview with Amanda Smith, Michael Kieran Harvey describes his time studying at the Franz Liszt Academy as crucial in his path as a musician. It was during this time, Harvey says, that he became fully convinced of the importance and urgency of artistic practice.<sup>138</sup> In

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<sup>129</sup> *Marta Abraham; Ildikó Nagy*, Marta Abraham, Rodepomp, 1997, CD.

<sup>130</sup> *Signs, Games + Messages*, Jennifer Koh, Chicago, CDR 90000 143, 2013, CD.

<sup>131</sup> *Intertwined Paths*, Joel Bardolet, SEED, SEED002, 2016, CD.

<sup>132</sup> *Franck – Kurtág – Previn – Schumann*, Augustin Hadelich, Avie, AV2347, 2016, CD.

<sup>133</sup> "Marta Abraham Biography," accessed August 3, 2017, <http://www.martaabraham.com/en/biography>.

<sup>134</sup> Constance Shuman, e-mail message to Coombe, March 6, 2017.

<sup>135</sup> Augustin Hadelich, e-mail message to Coombe, March 9, 2017.

<sup>136</sup> Joel Bardolet, facebook message to Coombe, March 23, 2017.

<sup>137</sup> Michael Kieran Harvey, "Michael Kieran Harvey – Associate Artist," Australian Music Centre, <http://www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/artist/harvey-michael-kieran> (accessed August 3, 2017).

<sup>138</sup> Amanda Smith, "Into the Music – Michael Kieran Harvey," Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Radio National, MP3 download, 28:55, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/michael-kieran-harvey/6704490> (accessed March 17, 2016).

this sense, Harvey has direct personal experience of the political and social conditions that shaped artistic practice during Kurtág's time at the Liszt Academy and in Hungary at large. Harvey's Hungarian education as well as his extensive experience in contemporary music, including performing works by Kurtág, make him a valuable contributor to this research. Additionally, he provided clarification and guidance in matters of piano technique and interpretation of piano notation.

### ***Tre Pezzi – “Öd und traurig”***

For the first three phrases, the piano plays short ascending motifs in B major, creating a gentle, warm character. The addition of the violin on open strings (using pitches of G and D, D and A, finally A and E) create a sinister harmonic contrast against the piano. From this point, the intensity slowly builds between the two parts, culminating in a violin glissando to a major seventh and an extended ascending piano phrase, marked *rubato*, *parlando* (taking time, speech-like). After this peak, both instruments quickly return to the opening material, with a subdued character and hushed dynamic.

A recurring theme in our workshop with Michael Kieran Harvey was the importance of highlighting visual and gestural elements which, in turn, enhance the ritual of performance. For example, in the opening statement of the piano part (see Figure T), Harvey insisted that the hand-crossings were of critical importance.

Figure T: “Öd und traurig” from *Tre Pezzi* Op. 14e, system 1.<sup>139</sup>

Öd und traurig

op. 14e

con sord.  
[womöglich immer  
leere Saiten]

pp

ppp

una corda  
con molto ped.

Even though it is possible to play this opening phrase under one hand, Harvey believed that Kurtág specified the hand crossing to communicate the gentle, warm character of the music and to allow the pianist greater possibilities to develop each phrase with the weighting of the hands.<sup>140</sup> This suggestion ties in with concepts from Chapter 2; how highlighting gestural elements and finding the “interior quality” of each note can enhance the ritual of performance.

Another major interpretive decision hinged on how best to communicate the character and harmonic function of the violin drone, which is labelled *womöglich immer leere Saiten* (where possible always open strings). Kurtág has spoken about his use of open strings, saying; “I love open strings; I can’t help it. I use them whenever I can, perhaps because, to a certain extent, they stand for the zero-point.”<sup>141</sup> In this movement, Kurtág has used opened strings symbolically, as a base material which begins and finishes the movement.

Additionally, the open strings create harmonic tension against the piano phrases in B major,

<sup>139</sup> All score examples in Chapter 3 from György Kurtág, *Tre Pezzi*, Op. 14e, (Budapest, Editio Musica Budapest, 1996) unless stated otherwise.

<sup>140</sup> Michael Kieran Harvey, interview by Coombe, Hobart, Tasmania, March 24, 2016.

<sup>141</sup> Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages*, 69.

and thus provides the “bleak and sad” character of which the movement is titled. To accentuate this function, the drone was given a present and intense sound quality while remaining within a soft dynamic range. This augmented sound quality, however, caused problems with bow distribution; in rehearsal, the tone became stifled and grainy when played on the one bow. Harvey suggested taking an additional bow and hiding the bow changes while the piano part is active.

A critical examination of selected recordings revealed that three of four violinists play the drone under one bow, with unclear bowing choices from the remaining violinist. While the use of bow is not completely discernible from audio (not visual) recordings, the early dynamic decay in Marta Abraham’s recording suggests the use of one bow. Joel Bardolet and Augustin Hadelich take only one bow, whereas the fragility of tone in Jennifer Koh’s recording makes bow changes too difficult to ascertain.

This concern largely comes down to interpretation; if the drone is interpreted primarily as a gesture, it is natural to take a single bow and let the sound decay over a longer duration. If the drone is interpreted primarily as playing a harmonic role, then it is more suitable to take a second bow to assist in dynamic presence and a denser sound quality. Due to the deeper structure provided by “The Signs” (discussed below) the drone was interpreted primarily as a harmonic force. In accordance with Harvey’s advice, two bows with aurally hidden bow changes will be taken to best communicate the harmonic role. In this case, a fragile tone (as used by Koh) is not desired, as dense quality will enhance the harmonic function.

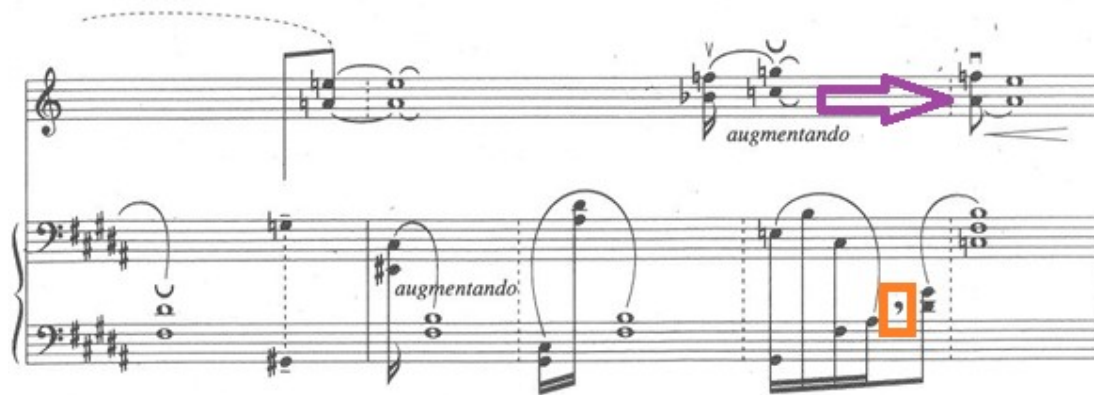
In this movement, “The Signs” provide insight into structure through the placement of the caesuras (breath marks). Both the violin and piano parts include many caesuras; in the violin,



these are often placed at the end of phrases, indicating a short breath before the next phrase.

In the piano part, however, they are often mid-phrase (see Figure U).

Figure U: “Öd und traurig” from *Tre Pezzi* Op. 14e, system 3.



It is clear from score analysis that each caesura in the piano part serves to break up a longer phrase. As demonstrated in Figure U, after each caesura there is a return to the opening motif. By isolating this motif, the performer can highlight its importance within the structure of the movement.

As the opening instruction is *una corda, con molto ped.* (soft pedal, with lots of sustain pedal), it seemed suitable to hold the sustain pedal throughout the entire movement including caesuras. In this interpretation, the caesuras would serve as a short pause with sustained resonance. The recordings support this rationale, with all pianists (Shai Wosner, Ildikó Nagy, Marco Scilironi and Joyce Yang) holding the sustain pedal through each caesura.

Harvey, on the other hand, suggested that these caesuras should denote a break in the sound, arguing that it would assist in showing the harmonic role of the violin part;

It'll help focus in on the counterpoint when the piano helps reveal what the violin is doing. You're either re-harmonising or you're displaying what's going on behind what you're playing; it suddenly comes through the fabric and acts as a counterpoint to your [the piano's] pedal effects. Which I think is really what he wants to do but he's not absolutely specific about it.<sup>142</sup>

As can be seen in Figure U, when the piano sound is stopped by lifting the pedal, the violin drone will, for a moment, be clearly audible, allowing its harmonic contrast to be brought to the fore. This figure occurs many times throughout the movement and, if clearly shown, can give the audience a heightened sense of the harmonic tension between the two instruments. Harvey's argument is convincing, and was retained for performance. Once again, "The Signs" denote deeper structure, and give interpretive insight. This harmonic tension between violin and piano determines the relation or conversational dynamic between the two instruments. As discussed in previous chapters, Kurtág's interpretive moulding and his notational style encourage a wide range of interpretive possibilities. The underlying dynamic of this movement was revealed by the placement of "The Signs," this time in the form of a caesura. As such, the current performance practice has been opposed; in performance the piano pedal was lifted to highlight harmonic tension between two instruments.

### ***Tre Pezzi – "Vivo"***

This movement is relatively straightforward and more in the tradition of a typical "Scherzo-like" movement. It has four changes in character or material which are separated by pauses or rests, and has a conversational dynamic.

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<sup>142</sup> Harvey, interview.

In the opening section (bars 1-14), the piano and violin are quietly argumentative. The violin begins a playful and cheeky quaver motif, only to be rudely interrupted by dry semi-quavers in the piano. In the second section (bars 15-22) which is marked *secco, ruvido* (dry, rough) the piano has an outburst of energy and dynamic, which is matched by aggressive violin pizzicato, marked *arraché* (forceful pizzicato). This section culminates in a dissonant three note rhythm played simultaneously by both instruments. In the third section (bars 23-30), the piano plays a quaver motif reminiscent of the violin's opening theme, while the violin plays sustained harmonics with fast crescendos and diminuendos mimicked by the piano. These dynamics, which end before reaching their full sound, emulate frustration. In the final section (31-40), the violin returns to its original quaver material, but this time the piano is playing with, not against it, with legato and slurred articulation. The movement finishes with cohesive and humorous gesture, a musical wink, in the form of two unison quavers played at *ppppp*.

The changes in character and the interplay between the two instruments make this movement highly conversational. This conversational dynamic is a key interpretive perspective for Kurtág's music, and this playfully antagonistic character of this movement is reminiscent of Kurtág's piece "Verés-veszekedés" (Spit-quarrel) from *Játékok*, Book 8. For piano four hand, it is performed by György and Marta Kurtág as a party piece,<sup>143</sup> who imbue it with experiences from 70 years of marriage.<sup>144</sup> Tim Rutherford-Johnson reflects on a live performance of *Játékok* by Marta and György Kurtág, saying;

As a duet the couple are unique performers. Kurtág's music of delicate gestures seems perfectly matched to husband and wife, full as it is with private jokes, recollections

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<sup>143</sup> György and Marta Kurtág, "Kurtág: Quarrel (from the Játékok)" (Video), Posted by musicvideoing, July 2, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQgyyqs4iMQ> (accessed August 3, 2017).

<sup>144</sup> Willson, "Kurtág, György," *Grove Music Online*.

and shared experience, a near dance of crossing limbs and touching hands. At one point in the choreographed performance the composer stands like a stern instructor behind his wife's shoulder as she performs the sole *Játék* dedicated to her; this is a quintessential Kurtág moment, taut, tender, and not a little oppressive.<sup>145</sup>

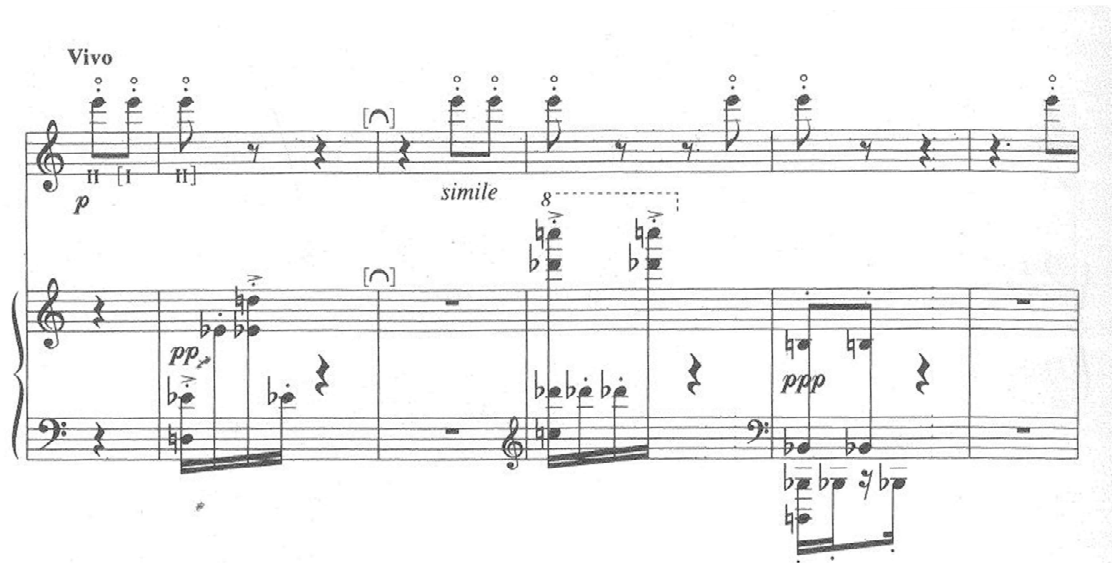
György and Marta Kurtág's performance so clearly highlights the playful, conversational dynamic that is present in "Vivo" and much of his other writing. Indeed, it seems that husband and wife demonstrate how gestural interpretation influences the "interior quality" of the notes, and turn, how this assists to create a ritualistic performance. Following this example, two distinct characters will be emphasised for the opening of this movement; the violin as playful and extrovert, and the piano as prickly and short-tempered. This was inspired by "Verés-veszekedés" as well a number of musical elements; the variance in pitch material, the dynamic difference, and rhythmic difference and unity.

The variance in pitch material is created by the juxtaposition of pure tonal centre of the violin (playing almost exclusively E harmonics) and the dissonant major sevenths in the piano (see Figure V). Dynamically, the violin is *piano* whereas the piano is marked *pianissimo*; a considerable difference in Kurtág's music. Finally, the placement of the piano phrase is always on the violins last note, as if the pianist is interrupting the violinists 'last word' in a sentence, further solidifying the character of a simmering dispute (see Figure V).

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<sup>145</sup> Tim Rutherford-Johnson, "Reviews resurrected: György and Márta Kurtág and Hiromi Kikuchi, Wigmore Hall, 2006" entry posted November 24, 2013, <https://johnsonsrambler.wordpress.com/tag/Gyorgy-kurtag/> (accessed July 4, 2017).

Figure V: “Vivo” from *Tre Pezzi* Op. 14e, bars 1-4.



To create this character, the harmonics have been played with as much natural resonance as possible, with an active “collé” bow stroke to create brightness and energy in the tone. The piano will create a dry and dissipating sound which assists and illustrates the prickly character, and as advised by Harvey, will not use pedal throughout this first section.

There is some variation of tempos in the recordings of this movement; indeed, Kurtág did not specify a tempo. Jennifer Koh and Joel Bardolet play at the fastest speed of quaver = 155.

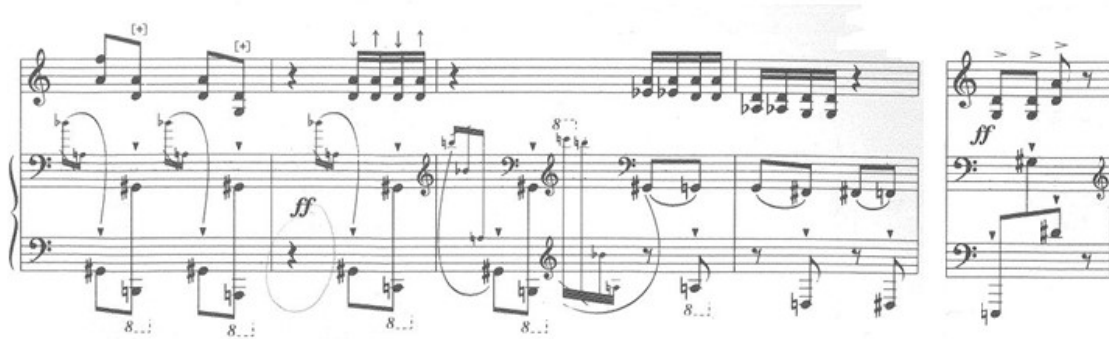
Augustin Hadelich’s tempo is more relaxed, at quaver = 145, while Marta Abraham is stately at quaver = 125. This movement was performed on the faster side at approximately quaver = 145, as a faster tempo communicates the playful and argumentative character.

In the second section the mood changes to a dramatic and aggressive tone, with the piano playing the dominant line and the violin interrupting with pizzicato. While the violin pizzicato is naturally softer than the lower-register piano, the score seems to indicate the violin should compete in gestural intensity and volume as much as possible, suggested by the

marking of *forte* in both violin and piano as well as *arraché* (forceful pizzicato) in the violin part.

To maximise volume of the pizzicato, Harvey suggested this pizzicato could be played in a Hungarian-gypsy style by strumming from a guitar-like position.<sup>146</sup> As there was both left hand pizzicato and directional pizzicato marked in the score (see Figure W) this strumming motion further emphasised the gesture. While this is a somewhat unorthodox move in the classical tradition, it helped to establish a different gestural character appropriate for the aggressive tone of the section and assisted in greater sound production. This combination of character and tone quality approaches as the “interior quality” of the music.

Figure W: “Vivo” from *Tre Pezzi* Op. 14e, bars 19-23.



In this section (bars 15-23), there was relatively small differences in interpretation in recordings, concerning the use of pedal and whether pizzicato was stopped or left to ring. Jennifer Koh and Augustin Hadelich’s recordings favoured no pedal and a dry sound, whereas Marta Abraham and Joel Bardolet’s recordings used a small amount of pedal. At bar 23, (see Figure W) Jennifer Koh and Augustin Hadelich let their pizzicato ring into the next

<sup>146</sup> Harvey, interview.

rest, while Marta Abraham and Joel Bardolet stopped the sound completely. In this section, minimal pedal was used and the pizzicato was left to ring after the last note.

### ***Tre Pezzi* – “Aus der Ferne”**

The third movement is titled “Aus der Ferne” (In the distance) and is marked *Sehr leise, äussert langsam* (very quiet, extremely slow). The mellow, spacious character is established by the piano, playing slow notes spanning a wide range. The violin, marked *molto sul tasto* (playing extremely on the fingerboard) and *sul G* (played on the G string), has a slow melodic line which slowly meanders to a B natural resolution. This is repeated once before the violin echoes the piano with fragile harmonics. The piano leads to a small climax before the violin finishes with a fragment marked *quasi niente* (almost nothing).

Kurtág’s interest in Gregorian chant, which he discusses during an interview in “The Matchstick Man,”<sup>147</sup> can perhaps be seen in the opening melody of the violin. The repetitive and elaborative lines which focus on a tonal centre (B natural) are reminiscent of Gregorian chant. The similarities can be seen in the two figures below.

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<sup>147</sup> Kele, György Kurtág: *The Matchstick Man*.

Figure X: “Aus der Ferne” from *Tre Pezzi* Op. 14e, system 1.

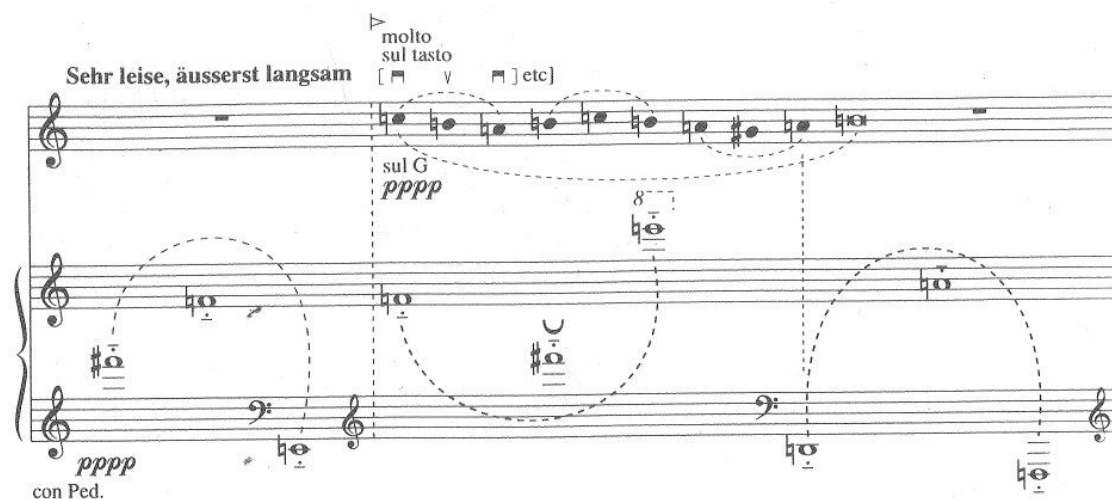


Figure Y: Melodic style in Gregorian chant.<sup>148</sup>

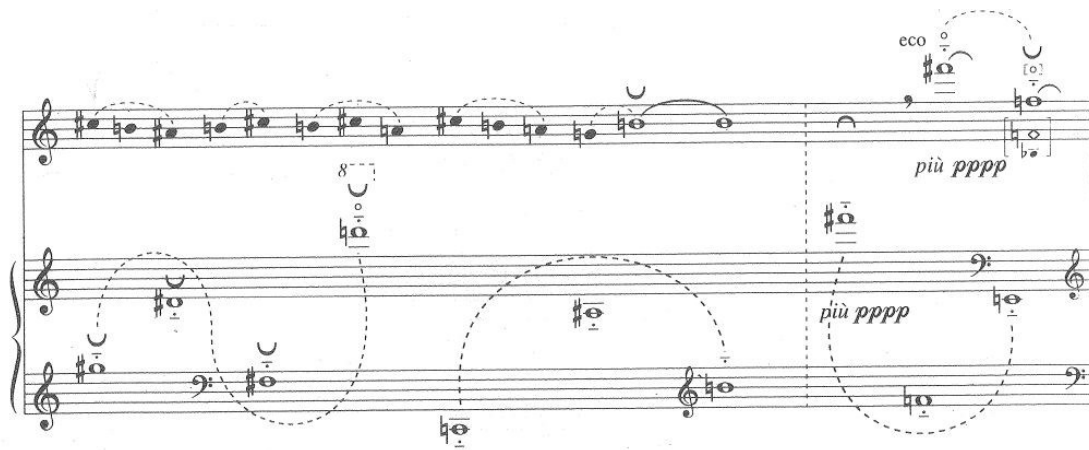


Additionally, Figure Z shows Kurtág's following phrase which, in the style of Gregorian chant, contains more ornamentation.

<sup>148</sup> "Ex.1 Melodic style in Gregorian chant," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/img/grove/music/F900072> (accessed September 20, 2017).



Figure Z: “Aus der Ferne” from *Tre Pezzi* Op. 14e, system 2.

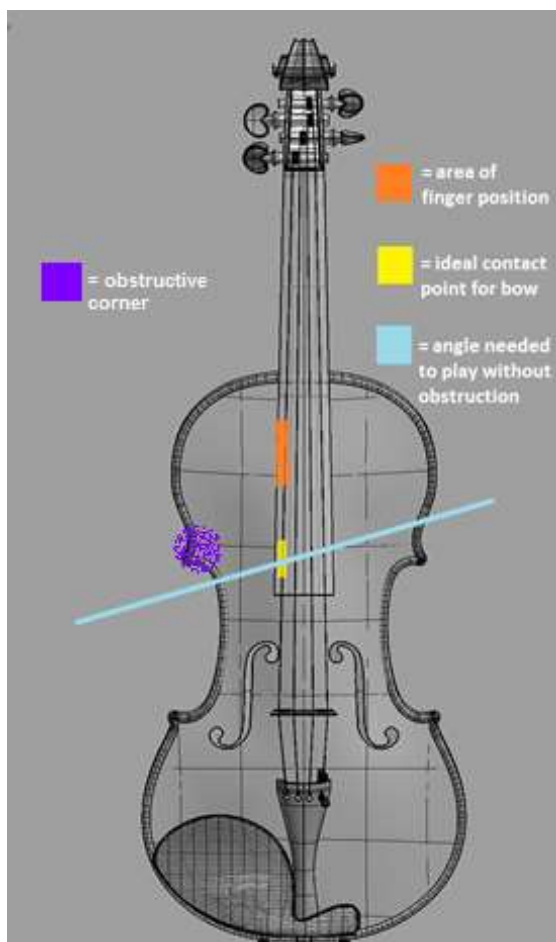


This reference to Gregorian chant highlights symbolic possibilities, in addition to the title of the piece, evokes a distant chant from a vestry or mediaeval church. Furthermore, this resemblance alludes to a certain harmonic direction, with all other notes in the phrasing serving to ornament the tonic note of B natural. The dotted slurs also indicate phrasing which reinforces the B natural as the tonic.

In “Aus der Ferne” Kurtág requests that the violin plays *molto sul tasto* while playing *sul G* (on the G string) in seventh position. As discussed with Graeme Jennings, the ideal contact point for the bow is halfway between the stopping point (fingered area) and the bridge, hence the bow’s contact point will change depending on the fingered pitch.<sup>149</sup> When playing in seventh position, the depression of the string is deeper than string depression in lower position. This depression in combination with ideal *molto sul tasto* contact point and the *sul G* means a different bow angle is needed to avoid bow collision with the side of the violin. This bow angle is “crooked” relative to a normal stroke. This position is shown in Figure AA below.

<sup>149</sup> Jennings, interview, November 1, 2015.

Figure AA: *Molto sul taste* bowing angle for “Aus der Ferne.”<sup>150</sup>



In addition to this change in bow angle, Graeme Jennings advised a hand position higher up on the bow and less bow hair contact – both assisting a softer dynamic by creating less weight and less surface area. These alterations presented challenges in the physical execution of this tone production as well as the resulting sound; to play on the cusp of audibility is risky. In the workshop, Harvey felt that this distant and fragile tone quality would only

<sup>150</sup> Tomasz Radechuk, *Violin - 3D Modelling – Visualization*, image used with permission, accessed September 8, 2016, <http://www.coroflot.com/botak/3d-modeling-visualisation>.

amplify the character more successfully.<sup>151</sup> This demonstrates how the marriage of character and tone quality create the “interior quality” of the notes for this movement.

The character of this movement, which Harvey likened to peacefully sliding out of consciousness, is eerie yet calm.<sup>152</sup> This character was conveyed in several ways: through a slow and ebbing tempo, an extremely soft dynamic, no hard accents (except at the climax), and a unique *molto sul tasto* tone quality.

### **Recital Reflection - *Tre Pezzi***

The interpretation of *Tre Pezzi*, featured in Recital 2, was influenced by key concepts touched on by Harvey as well as suggestions from Jennings. These concepts were Kurtág’s preference for a fragile sound world, an emphasis on gesture, and the ‘ritual’ of performance.

Additionally, an exploration of micro-level phrasing, as well as maintenance of an experimental attitude throughout preparation of this piece was critical to the interpretive process.

In “Öd und traurig,” it was planned that variation in phrasing and a calm mood was to be established through the “crossing hands” gesture. This worked extremely well, and is recommended interpretive direction. It was intended that the violin drone retain a present tone quality, establishing the dissonance vital to the communication of the bleak and sad character. In the rehearsal process it was clear that taking two bows for this drone ensured necessary dynamic and tone quality needed, and that the change of bow be hidden through timing with the piano. In performance, two of these bow changes could have been more legato and better

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<sup>151</sup> Harvey, interview.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

timed. It was intended that the mid-phrase caesuras in the piano part should be played without pedal to allow the drone to break through the texture; this worked well in rehearsal but in performance the caesuras were a little short in duration. It is advised that these caesuras should be played with greater length.

In the second movement, it was planned to establish a difference in character between the violin and piano to emphasize the conversational nature of the movement. In rehearsal, the playful violin and the cantankerous piano was established through emphasis on pitch material, dynamic difference and articulation; this worked well for performance, though some violin harmonics did not speak clearly. It was planned that an alternative violin position would be taken for the *arraché* pizzicato section to assist in louder dynamic and percussive quality. In performance, this gesture was compromised by the removal and application of a mute, and the sound of the bow being placed on the music stand. It is recommended that these practical considerations could be solved with a slide-on mute and music stand padding. It was intended that the final pizzicato in the *arraché* pizzicato section would allowed to ring. This happened as planned in performance, but on further reflection, dampening the final pizzicato would better emphasize the explosive, aggressive character.

In the third movement “Aus der Ferne,” the rehearsal process led to the use of a specific *molto sul tasto* technique which created a distant, fragile and hollow sound quality. This worked well in performance, however, the use of vibrato could have been improved by re-energised vibrato at the beginnings of new phrases. It was planned that the violin would be slightly louder than the piano; this worked well in rehearsal spaces but the piano overly dominated in the venue, and is a recommended change. It was intended that this movement, both performers would retain physical stillness. This was addressed and improved in the

rehearsal process, but in performance some inadvertent ‘body beating’ occurred. This ‘body beating’ is not recommended as it disturbed the timeless character.

This chapter examined the interpretation and performance of Kurtág’s *Tre Pezzi* (Three pieces) Op. 14e for violin and piano. Interpretive decisions were reached in consultation with Michael Kieran Harvey, analysis of selected recordings by violinists Marta Abraham, Jennifer Koh, Joel Bardolet, and Augustin Hadelich, and key findings from previous chapters. As shown in “Öd und traurig,” Kurtág uses “The Signs” to denote structure; in this case, a caesura served the purpose of highlighting returning motifs and harmonic tension. Also in this movement, Kurtág’s predilection to recreate the ritual of performance was found in the piano part’s frequent hand-crossings. Interpreting the work as a whole reiterated Kurtág’s conversational approach to chamber music, with each part maintaining differentiated but reactive characters through harmonic tensions and distinguished interval sets, rhythmic separations and unities, and more traditional timbral identities. These characters were further highlighted by Harvey and Jennings, who facilitated a greater focus on the “interior quality” of the note through alternative pizzicato and *molto sul tasto* techniques. A critical reflection on the performance of these movements evaluated interpretational aims and their execution. These were deemed successful, though some decisions will be reconsidered for future performances.

## Chapter Four - *Varga Bálint Ligatúrāja*

This chapter discusses the interpretation and performance of Kurtág's *Varga Bálint Ligatúrāja*, for violin, cello and piano. The relationship between the dedicatee, András Bálint Varga, and György and Marta Kurtág is explored, as well as the interpretive decisions made by The Vienna Piano Trio, The Peabody Trio, and Édua Zádory, Balázs Szokolay, and Tamás Varga. This chapter argues that Kurtág uses *ossias* to empower performers to assume greater interpretive responsibility; in this case, the interpretive outcomes of an optional *battuto* are discussed. Further discussion recalls chapter 3, where gestural interpretation of minims in *Varga Bálint Ligatúrāja* recalls those of "Ligatura Y." In contrast to previous works, it is argued that *Varga Bálint Ligatúrāja* elucidates its structure not through "The Signs", but through the transformation of rhythmic motifs.

*Varga Bálint Ligatúrāja* is a short one movement piece, lasting approximately four minutes. Marked *molto strascinato, pesante* (very dragged, heavy), slow minims are passed between the strings and the piano for most of the piece, creating a gloomy, heavy atmosphere. A triplet figure is introduced in the piano which gains momentum and leads to a section marked *poco a poco piu agitato* (little by little more agitated). This builds to a dynamic and timbral climax, with dissonant ten note chords in the piano. The strings also build in intensity with a combination of sustained upper register chords and *col legno battuto* (hit with the wood of the bow). After a short pause, it returns to the original opening material; this time with small embellishments, marked *shattenhaft* (shadowy) emphasizing the subdued character. A new section marked *scorrevole, semplice* (gliding, simple) starts with a short piano solo which gradually diminishes into a final chord.

This piece is dedicated to Bálint András Varga, a fellow Hungarian of Kurtág's generation. Varga worked as a promoter of contemporary classical music for Editio Musica Budapest - Hungary's major classical music publishing company.<sup>153</sup> Following this, he held the same position at Universal Edition in Vienna, while also pursuing music journalism with a focus on interviewing contemporary composers. His books include *Three Questions for Sixty-Five Composers* (2011), *Conversations with Iannis Xenakis* (1996), *From Boulanger to Stockhausen: Interviews and a memoir* (2013) in addition to his book on Kurtág *Three Interviews and Ligeti Hommages* (2009).

Varga enjoys a close relationship with the Kurtágs, conducting interviews with György and Márta over a period of 25 years. These interviews occurred in 1982, 1996 and 2007, with each interview covering a wider breath of topics than the last, with the final interview lasting four hours.<sup>154</sup> Interestingly, Varga allows the Kurtágs a degree of control over the material published; György can edit all interviews, which Varga claims puts "the stamp of authenticity on the text."<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, Varga expressed his "great affection" for the Kurtágs, and claim that parts of his interviews demonstrate "the hallmarks typical of György and Márta Kurtág: the composer's relentless self-criticism and his wife's critical remarks, with Kurtág immediately acting on them, in a rueful gesture of atonement."<sup>156</sup> With this intimate relationship and shared editorial power, Varga provides a critical interpretive insight into Kurtág's musical philosophy and practice. While Varga's relinquishment of editorial power allows Kurtág to present a curated persona, it also allows Kurtág to communicate his intentions as clearly as possible. This quality is touched on by Varga in the preface:

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<sup>153</sup> Bálint András Varga, *From Boulanger to Stockhausen* (New York, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013), 310.

<sup>154</sup> Varga, *From Boulanger to Stockhausen*, 19.

<sup>155</sup> Varga, *From Boulanger to Stockhausen*, 24.

<sup>156</sup> Varga, *From Boulanger to Stockhausen*, 25.

I am most grateful to Marta and György Kurtág for the time they accorded me not just for the interviews but for the many months (even years) of intensive work on the texts to make absolutely sure that every single word was a faithful mirror of what they had in mind.<sup>157</sup>

It is not possible to know how much of the character of this movement, which is gloomy and surreal, was influenced by Kurtág's relationship with Varga. However, as Tosser notes, the title and musical reference of the "ligature" implies contact and connection, and may hold symbolic meaning.

*Varga Bálint Ligatúrāja* was written for a surprise concert on Varga's retirement from Universal Edition in 2007.<sup>158</sup> The concert programme comprised of twelve world premieres written for the occasion; all pieces were performed by The Vienna Piano Trio and featured compositions by Wolfgang Rihm, Arvo Part, Friedrich Cerha, Harrison Birtwistle, and George Friedrich Haas, in addition to Kurtág and others.<sup>159</sup> The Vienna Piano Trio had rehearsed with all composers, either in person, or in the case of Kurtág, over the telephone.<sup>160</sup> While the premiere recording of *Varga Bálint Ligatúrāja* was never released publicly, Universal Edition has provided this recording for research purposes. Recordings of *Varga Bálint Ligatúrāja* have also been made by the Peabody Trio,<sup>161</sup> however it is unknown whether they have worked with Kurtág. Édua Zádory (violin) Balázs Szokolay (piano) and Tamás Varga (cello) have also recorded this piece, and all three musicians have worked with

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<sup>157</sup> Varga, György Kurtág: *Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages*, xi.

<sup>158</sup> Varga, *From Boulanger to Stockhausen*, 375.

<sup>159</sup> Varga, *From Boulanger to Stockhausen*, 376.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Peabody Trio, "György Kurtág: Varga Bálint Ligatúrāja," Posted by Besenarts LLC September 23, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C908G72SsPk> (accessed August 9, 2017).



Kurtág, though on what repertoire is unknown.<sup>162</sup> It is interesting to note that all of these recordings are live performances, and as reflected by the small number of recordings available, this is one of Kurtág's lesser known works.

The interpretive focus for this piece begins with the character of the minim line played by the violin and cello.

Figure BB: *Varga Bálint Ligaturája*, bars 1-4.<sup>163</sup>

The musical score for *Varga Bálint Ligaturája*, bars 1-4, is presented in three staves. The top staff is for Violin, the middle for Viola, and the bottom for Piano. The Violin and Viola parts are marked *pp lontano* and *con sordino di metallo*. The Piano part is marked *Molto strascinato, pesante* with a tempo indication of  $\text{♩} = \text{ca } 50$  and *con supersordino*. The Piano part also includes the instruction *poco in rilievo* in the final measure. The score shows minim notes with long, curved lines above them, indicating a dragged, heavy quality.

These minims which are marked *Molto strascinato, pesante* (Very dragged, heavy) occur in bars 1-13 and sporadically from bars 23-34 and provide the basic character for the piece. Like “Ligatura Y” from *Signs, Games and Messages* for string trio, these minims have been interpreted as having a dragged, heavy quality with small crescendos and decrescendos in each bow stroke. This phrasing provides a natural resistance in the bow, as well as creating a

<sup>162</sup> Édua Zádory, "Kurtág.Flv," Posted by seitenkunst, March 21, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFEthRX8HwY> (accessed August 9, 2017).

<sup>163</sup> All score examples in Chapter 4 taken from György Kurtág, *Varga Bálint Ligaturája*, (Vienna, Universal Edition, 2007) unless stated otherwise.

breath-like quality. This interpretation emphasizes gestural and visual elements, as well as the ritual of performance.

The Vienna Piano Trio, The Peabody Trio, and Édua Zádory's ensemble also phrase the minims as described above; the major discrepancy between recordings is the tempo. While Kurtág gives a clear indication of the speed of this movement at crotchet = 50, it is interesting to note that all ensembles play significantly slower than this marking, with The Vienna Piano Trio the fastest at crotchet = 40, The Peabody Trio at crotchet = 36 and Édua Zádory's ensemble at crotchet = 26. In all three ensembles, these tempos seem to deviate considerably, giving momentum and drive towards the climax, and returning to the original tempo towards the end of the movement. In the rehearsal process, a number of different tempos were tried; a slower tempo (crotchet = 32) was preferred, though flexibility will be maintained.

In the opening bars of this piece the harmonic development, while shifting, essentially remains static. This non-tonal stability was described by Michael Kieran Harvey as a crystal gradually revolving to reflect different colours and lights; this concept is useful for the opening of this piece.<sup>164</sup>

This movement is somewhat of an anomaly in the repertoire selected for research; instead of "The Signs" denominating structure of a movement, in *Varga Bálint Ligatúrāja* it is the transformation of rhythmic motifs that provide this function. In the opening, the recurring minims provide static quality. The introduction and condensation of a triplet motif leads to the climax, after which the original mood is evoked by the return of the minim figure. Rhythmic embellishments on these minims provide variance, before minims and breves lead to stillness.

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<sup>164</sup> Harvey, interview.

In particular, interpretive attention focussed on the transformation of the triplet motif to lead to the climax. The repeating triplet figure occurs in bars 11, 13, and 14-18. The triplet is initially isolated, as seen below in the bars 11 and 13. From the *poco a poco piu agitato* (little by little more agitated), the triplet motif dominates the violin and cello and leads to the climax of the piece at bar 18.

Figure CC: Varga Bálint *Ligaturája*, bars 6-18.

The musical score for Varga Bálint's *Ligaturája*, bars 6-18, is presented for violin, cello, and piano. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The score shows the development of a triplet motif across the three instruments. The violin and cello parts feature a triplet motif that becomes more prominent and agitated towards the end of the section. The piano part provides harmonic support with chords and arpeggios. Dynamics include *ppp*, *pp-p*, and *rfz*. Performance instructions include *pizz.*, *arco*, *dolce*, and *piu vicino*.

2

12

poco a poco più agitato

più sonore, cresc. assai

più sonore, cresc. assai

poco a poco più agitato

più sonore, cresc. assai

16

[sempre con sord.]

[battuto]

*f*

più *f*

[sempre con sord.]

battuto

*f*

più *f*

*f*

più *f*

To reflect this transformation, the triplets in bars 11 and 13 were held back in tempo to create a plodding feeling which complemented the dragged minims. In these bars, recordings differ in their use of the piano pedal – both The Peabody Trio and Édua Zádory’s ensemble use pedal, while The Vienna Trio use little or none. Experimentation of this effect lead to little or no pedal use; *senza pèdale* was used to great effect in *Tre Pezzi*, and has inspired further use.

This *senza pédale* reflects the plodding character yet also foreshadows at what is to come. In bars 14-18, the triplets were interpreted as pushing forward, which give momentum for the sextuplets and in turn the climax in bar 18. In this phrase (bars 10-18) the transforming triplet motif is the impetus the change in character and path to the climax.

In the penultimate bar, Kurtág has marked an optional *battuto* (see bar 17, Figure BB above). Kurtág is known for these optional performance directions, which extend to sound quality, dynamics and pitch. In conversation with Varga, Kurtág reveals how these *ossias* are created through working with different performers.

Varga: Do you mean that you modify a piece when a new performer plays it?

Kurtág: Yes. It may come to that. I like it when I see that a certain solution sits particularly well with someone.

Varga: And if the same solution doesn't sit so well with someone else?

Kurtág: Then I will propose a difference version.<sup>165</sup>

It is clear from this quote that Kurtág sees *ossias* as a solution to technical or interpretive problems. *Ossias* can provide insight into specific moments, where perhaps in rehearsal, Kurtág offered different solutions. From analysis of recordings, it is clear that the Vienna Piano Trio and Édua Zádory, Balázs Szokolay and Tamás Varga use the *battuto*, whereas the Peabody Trio does not. The reasons for this *ossia* was discussed with faculty staff member and violinist, Dr Susan Collins, who illustrated that if the *battuto* is included, it amplifies both the gestural intensity and timbre of the cellist who is already playing *battuto*. However, the *battuto* offers limited dynamic power in the climax (marked *forte* with *crescendo*). If the *battuto* is not included, the reverse is true; the *normale* bow stroke creates a different timbre

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<sup>165</sup> Varga, György Kurtág: *Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages*, 30.

to the cellist, but offers greater sound production. As gestural intensity and timbral cohesion is prioritised, the *battuto* will be included. An added complexity of this movement is the *scordatura* required of the cellist in bar 22 (see figure DD).

Figure DD: *Varga Bálint Ligatúrāja*, bars 19-22.

\*) Vc.: scordatura con caviglio der C- Saite auf H, bleibt bis zum Ende des Satzes.

The composer's instructions ask the cellist, while playing, to detune an open C string to a B natural. This tuning is retained until the end of the piece. As expected, all ensembles retain this *scordatura*, however in all three recordings the sound of the peg moving against the peg box is distinctly audible. As this bar is marked *pianississimo* and *misterioso* (mysterious) the sudden noise of the peg did somewhat detract from the character. The cracking sound of the peg may be able to be eliminated in the recording studio, but as these were live recordings there was no opportunity to correct this extraneous noise.

In performance, this *scordatura* was omitted as the cellist had problems with the pegs and pegbox. The solution reached was to play bar 21 one octave above written pitch. While this was far from ideal, there was no extraneous noise from the pegbox during this bar. It is

possible that Kurtág may have desired or was ambivalent to this extraneous noise, however as the phrase is marked *misterioso* this seems unlikely.

### **Performance Reflection**

The interpretation of *Varga Bálint Ligatúrja*, performed in Recital 2, was assisted by faculty staff violinist Dr Susan Collins, and influenced by interpretive advice from Jennings and Harvey. The interpretation of this piece incorporated concepts that have reoccurred throughout the course of my research; an emphasis on gesture, and awareness of the ‘ritual’ of performance, and conversational qualities highlighted by micro-level phrasing.

The character of *Varga Bálint Ligatúrja* was determined by the interpretation of the opening minims; in rehearsal they were given a dragging, bulging shape with decay at the ends of the notes, almost like heavy breathing. In performance, this dragging shape, which enhanced both gestural qualities and micro-level phrasing, could have been even greater. It is a recommended interpretive option for these minims.

Like the Vienna Piano Trio, Ensemble Epomeo and Édua Zádory’s ensemble, the rehearsal process lead to the interpretation of this movement at a slower tempo than marked on the score. The performance tempo, at approximately crotchet = 36, assisted in the mysterious, cloistered character and is a recommended interpretive consideration. While this did not manifest in rehearsal, during performance a slightly disparate sense of pulse within the ensemble led to ‘body beating’ which detracted from the quiet and calm mood. The atonal harmonic development in this opening section caused some difficulties with ensemble

intonation. It is recommended that ensemble intonation could be improved through the establishment of a tonal centre (even without the semblance of traditional tonal harmony).

In *Varga Bálint Ligatúrja* Kurtág used rhythmic motifs rather than “The Signs” to denote underlying structure. In particular, the rehearsal process identified the transforming triplet motif as the path to the climax of the movement. In rehearsal, bars 11 and 13 were played without pedal but with length. In performance, perhaps due to acoustics, the piano was a little too short and dry to fully render this transition, and it is recommended that this motif be more *tenuto* (held). In rehearsal, the optional *battuto* was chosen to match the cello’s sharp and percussive timbre. This worked well in performance and is a recommended option, though the original *normale* stroke is an option. Micro-level phrasing and transitional cohesion could be enhanced by playing the three notes directly before the *battuto* with a more abrasive timbre.

In the cello’s *scordatura* bar, there was concern that, due to peg-box problems, the string would slip too low and compromise the remainder of the piece. This *scordatura* bar was therefore played one octave above written pitch; this compromise was not ideal, but did prevent additional undesired peg box noise noted in other recordings.<sup>166</sup>

During the performance during bar 19 and bar 27, the ensemble dynamics were unbalanced; a gestural interpretation and faster bow speed would be recommended for these bars. In bars 30-34 the dynamic balance was good with the cello harmonics slightly foregrounded against the lower register of the violin.

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<sup>166</sup> All three recordings of this piece have been live, not studio, recordings, and have the sound of the peg ‘creaking’ against the peg box.



This chapter discussed the interpretive decisions for the performance of Kurtág's *Varga Bálint Ligatúrja*, for violin, cello and piano. The close relationship between András Bálint Varga and György and Marta Kurtág was revealed in Varga's books, where his relinquishment of editorial control allowed Kurtág to curate his persona while directly elucidating his musical philosophy and practice. The character of the movement and the potentially symbolic implications of the title were discussed regarding this relationship, and recordings made by The Vienna Piano Trio, The Peabody Trio, and an ensemble led by violinist Édua Zádory were critically analysed. The gestural approach to performing minims in *Varga Bálint Ligatúrja* recalled the discussion of "Ligatura Y" in Chapter 3. Newly discussed in this chapter was Kurtág's use of *ossias*, which revolved around the exploration of an optional *battuto* passage. It was argued that the function of *ossias* in Kurtág's music is to cater for individualised interpretations; *ossias* are often added by Kurtág to create an alternative musical outcome for a particular performer. This revealed another way in which Kurtág's music encourages players to experiment in the process of interpreting his music; furthermore, it illustrates Kurtág's desire for performers to place this process ahead of any fixed or predetermined interpretation of his works.

## Conclusion

This performance oriented research has provided interpretive insight into selected violin works by Kurtág: *Signs, Games and Messages* (1989-) for solo violin, *Signs, Games and Messages* (1989-) for string trio, *Tre Pezzi* (1979) for violin and piano and *Varga Bálint Ligaturája* (2007). Insight into these works was sought from performers Peter Tanfield, Michael Kieran Harvey, and in particular Graeme Jennings, who has worked extensively with Kurtág. Relevant recordings were critically analysed and provided further insight into the interpretive practice of Kurtág's music. These formed the basis of my interpretive process, which was discussed throughout and developed across the course of the research.

This research addresses a large gap in this field, as there is currently no existing interpretive framework for any of these violin works by György Kurtág. Indeed, there is almost no interpretive guide for any instrument except Rutherford-Johnson's research on the interpretation selected piano works. As demonstrated in the research, it would be antithetical to Kurtág's musical philosophy to create an interpretive formula for his music. Nonetheless, the compilation of existing anecdotal evidence from performers who have worked with Kurtág, in addition to the interviewing experienced performers directly, will provide insight into interpreting Kurtág's music.

Using anecdotal evidence, selected recordings and advice gathered from Jennings, Tanfield and Harvey, critical interpretive elements of Kurtág's music were explored. It was argued that Kurtág's notational style deliberately encourages flexibility of interpretation, which can be particularly seen in his use of "The Signs." Kurtág's use of *ossias* also demonstrate this flexibility, as these *ossias* are often reached consultation with performers. The importance of

a gestural interpretation of Kurtág's works was presented, and can be seen in the interpretation of *eco* passages in "Doloroso Garzulyéknak" and the dragging minims in "Ligatura Y" and *Varga Bálint Ligaturája*. This gestural interpretation is closely linked to Kurtág's interest in the ritual of performance, which have shaped the interpretation of the "silent events" in "Doloroso" and the air bowings in "Virág - Zsigmondy Dénesnek." The conversational nature of Kurtág's writing, both in speech-like qualities of a linear phrase and the instrumental relations in his chamber music was highlighted as a key interpretive element. This interpretation was emphasized in "féerie d'automne" and "Vivo" from *Tre Pezzi*.

Experimentation with micro-level phrasing was employed to expand expressive possibilities for these examples. It was argued that Kurtág's uses "The Signs" to demonstrate the underlying structure of the piece, in an attempt to give performers more context to inform their interpretation. This was demonstrated in "Öd und traurig" from *Tre Pezzi*. Less often, Kurtág uses rhythmic or harmonic means to denote structure, such as in *Varga Bálint Ligaturája* and "Hommage á J.S.B." In addition to these key concepts, several alternative techniques were explored, including pizzicato position, circular bowing and *molto sul tasto* techniques. This technical explanation will greatly assist other performers preparing these works.

Directions for future research include consulting other violinists and string players who have worked directly with Kurtág, including Sakari Oramo, Movses Pogossian, András Keller, James Cuddeford, Hiromi Kikuchi, Ken Hakii, other members and ex-members of the Arditti Quartet, and many others on issues of performance practice that arise in other works of Kurtág. Reflection on the impact of my research into performance of selected works of Kurtág raises the question too as to the effect this rigorous interpretive process and

engagement with Kurtág's music has had on other performers and on their interpretation and performance of other repertoire. While I did not have access to Kurtág's handwritten scores located in the Paul Sacher archives in Switzerland for this project, these primary sources may provide a rich resource for future study of performance practice and the development of his compositional and notational style. While it was outside the scope of my study, it became clear during my research that there has been very little attention directed to the musical contribution of Marta Kurtág, despite her important role as György's primary consultant, chamber music coach, performer and translator. More research in this area would contribute significantly to the understanding of her individual role, their musical partnership and the interpretive practice of Kurtág's music.

## Appendix – Contents of Folio

### Recital 1

- 1) J. S. Bach - Partita No. 3 in E major - I - Preludio
- 2) György Kurtág, from *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin – “Perpetuum Mobile” (for Ágnes Vadas)
- 3) J. S. Bach - Partita No. 3 in E major - II - Loure
- 4) György Kurtág, from *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin – “Thomas Blum in memoriam”
- 5) J. S. Bach - Partita No. 3 in E major - III - Gavotte en Rondeau
- 6) György Kurtág, from *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin – “Anziksz Kellerannának”
- 7) J. S. Bach - Partita No. 3 in E major - IV - Menuet I
- 8) J. S. Bach - Partita No. 3 in E major - IV - Menuet II
- 9) György Kurtág, from *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin – “Népdalféle”
- 10) György Kurtág, from *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin – “Doloroso Garzulyéknak”
- 11) J. S. Bach - Partita No. 3 in E major - V - Bouree
- 12) György Kurtág, from *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin – “Hommage á J. S. B.”
- 13) J. S. Bach - Partita No. 3 in E major - VI - Gigue
- 14) György Kurtág, from *Signs, Games and Messages* for solo violin – “The Carenza Jig”

**Recital 2**

Béla Bartók - Selections of 44 Duos for Two Violins, Sz. 98, BB 104

No. 27 Limping Dance

No. 28 Sorrow

No. 13 Wedding Song

No. 37 Prelude and Canon

Associate Artist: Joseph E. Phillips, violin

Eugène Ysaÿe - Sonata No. 2 in A minor, "Obsession"

I Prelude

II Melancholia

III Danse des Ombres

IV Les Furies

György Kurtág - *Varga Bálint Ligatúrāja*

Associate Artists: Jack Barnes, piano, Elizabeth Moss, cello

Pierre Boulez - *Anthemes I*

Béla Bartók - Selections of 44 Duos for Two Violins, Sz. 98, BB 104

No. 39 Serbian Dance

No. 42 Arabian Song

No. 21 New Year's Song

No. 32 Dancing Song

Associate Artist: Joseph E. Phillips, violin

György Kurtág - *Tre pezzi*, op. 14e

I - Öd und traurig (bleak and sad)

II – Vivo (lively)

III – Aus der Ferne (from a distance)

Associate Artist: Jack Barnes, piano

### **Recital 3**

*Violin Concerto in D minor* by Jean Sibelius

I - Allegro moderato

II - Adagio di molto

III - Allegro, ma non tanto

Associate Artist: Karen Smithies, piano

### **Recording Project**

György Kurtág - *Signs, Games and Messages* (1989-) for string trio

- 1) “...féerie d'automne”
- 2) “Hommage á J.S.B.”
- 3) “Virág - Zsigmondy Dénesnek”
- 4) “Hommage a Ránki György” (Pizzicato-keringő)
- 5) “Ligatura Y”
- 6) “Virág az ember, Mijakónak”

Associate Artists: Joseph E. Phillips (viola), Lachlan Johnson (cello)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

- 7) Violin Concerto No 5 in A major K219, “Allegro aperto” (with cadenza)

## Final Recital

György Kurtág - Selections from *Signs, Games and Messages* (1989-) for solo violin

1. Népdalféle (in the style of a folk song)
2. Perpetuum Mobile
3. Doloroso Garzulyéknak” (Sad song for the Garzulys)
4. Hommage á J.S.B.

György Kurtág - Selections from *Signs, Games and Messages* (1989-) for string trio

1. Hommage á J.S.B.
2. Virág - Zsigmondy Dénesnek
3. ...féeerie d'automne

Associate Artists: Joseph E. Phillips (viola) Lachlan Johnson (cello)

György Kurtág - *Tre pezzi*, op. 14e

- I - Öd und traurig (bleak and sad)
- II – Vivo (lively)
- III – Aus der Ferne (in the distance)

Associate Artist: Jack Barnes (piano)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Violin Sonata No. 1 in G major, Op. 78 (1878-79)

- I - Vivace ma non troppo
- II - Adagio
- III - Allegro molto moderato



Associate Artist: Karen Smithies (piano)

György Kurtág - Selections from *Signs, Games and Messages* (1989-) for solo violin

1. In memoriam Blum Tamás
2. Anzicsz Kellerannának” (Postcard to Anna Keller)
3. The Carenza Jig

György Kurtág - Selections from *Signs, Games and Messages* (1989-) for string trio

1. Ligatura Y
2. Pizzicato-keringő
3. Virág az ember, Mijakónak

Associate Artists: Joseph E. Phillips (viola) Lachlan Johnson (cello)

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